

The Digital Galleries of Our Minds

Noah Levin

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by

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For my wife, Jenny,

*And our children:
Talía, Ronen, and Ziva*

Without whose support and inspiration none of this would have been possible.

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0 Foreword¹

I just read the news that Ursula K. Le Guin passed away. It was two days ago, but it still takes time for information to spread, even with the countless methods of electronic dissemination we have. It feels fitting that I partly dedicate this volume to her because she is one of the reasons I am writing this. Without her influence and words, I would have never thought seriously about undertaking this project. Her speech when she received the “Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters” coupled with some other bits of advice from authors that began later in life saying something to the tune of “my best advice is to start sooner than later!” lit the proverbial fire under my butt. This was maybe half a year ago, and here I am, finally putting some of my visions into existence, as my technical ability to use the written word has finally caught up to my ability to imagine (I hope), and I can finally craft a story very close to what I envision it should be. At the very least, what I am presenting here is a faithful presentation of what I was one day hoping to create.

I write this foreword now before completing two of the three stories contained herein because it feels appropriate. I have their path laid out clearly in my head and I am having that rare feeling of gumption to finish them, but I must write this first. Writing is a life activity, as Steinbeck taught me from his experiences writing the incomparable *Grapes of Wrath*. This foreword to honor Le Guin is the exact preparative I need to complete my short volume. It will be my first piece that I will let others (anyone) read and all I can do is my best, writing for myself and seeing if others enjoy it as well. Stephen King, in his foreword for his last version of *The Gunslinger* that he knows people won’t and shouldn’t read but actually wanted them to read, helped solidify my acceptance of that mantra.

While this volume is dedicated partly to Ursula K. Le Guin’s *memory*, and my stories are mostly about our *memories* and how they define us (and these stories are not merely my musings on the future of science and technology – truly great works of science fiction and fantasy perform their best when they utilize the right fanciful setting to tell a story about humanity), it feels odd to say this both because the news of her death is so fresh and because she

¹ I debated what to call this section. It’s not exactly an introduction, and it’s definitely not a prologue. Nor is it a preface, since it doesn’t set up the rest of the work and you don’t *need* to read this chapter. You don’t need to read anything I’ve written, actually. Forewords are usually written by someone other than the author, but they can be written by the author (in case you were of the school that an author is banned from writing their own foreword). As this is something that I would like you to read before my other words and is a sort of story in itself, I settled on the term “Foreword” but gave it an actual chapter number! Like how I did that? Made it a 0? I’m rather proud of myself and thought it was a little creative, since I’ve always thought if someone wants you to read something, it should be integrated into the rest of the work. Like footnotes, and this one in particular. You really don’t need to, nor should you, be reading this. My dissertation adviser Michael Bradie told me that if it’s worth saying in a footnote, then it’s worth saying in the body of the work. If it’s not, then take it out! This is the only time I plan on defying that advice.

will never die. Her life and words live on through her works, and will undoubtedly continue to entertain and inspire many people for generations to come. The irony of dedicating this volume to memory is that we don't really have memories as we generally think about them. We have our lasting impressions of what struck us as interesting and important about an event or feeling. We paint a picture of what we remember, focusing on the details that matter to us, for whatever reason. Oftentimes, we are unaware of the reason ourselves. Much like how the painter of a person's portrait attempts to cast their (yes, this is a singular their, thank you, Ursula, for convincing me to use this) subject in a specific type of light, those events that happen to us get filtered into an essence that preserves those most striking elements. The portraits of memories are all we have. And there you have it, the meaning for the original title of this volume buried in that most useless of all pieces: the foreword...but I have clearly chosen to change the title away from this.

After reading this proposed title, my wife remarked that while the title fit the stories, it sounded a bit sentimental and didn't make it clear that the work was one of science fiction. She was right, so I thought about this, and also realized I'm not telling tales about memories themselves. I'm musing about the collections of our memories and how they impact our identities. If I take the portrait analogy one step further, then our minds (and our identities) would be portrait galleries, with the portraits of our memories adorning the labyrinthine walls of our innermost caverns. Some paintings will be better than others and more cherished; others will get dusty; still others will get put into storage, possibly never to be seen again. Some will get damaged and even some will be found to be fakes. Some go on loan, and some get copied. We store them in a fashion similar to computer files, but often with much less organization (or maybe not, and if you saw how I organized my files, you'd understand). Since our brains are effectively a network of electronic impulses, our minds can, in theory, be stored as files on a computer and subsequently even recreated in a virtual space so that anyone could take a stroll through the digital galleries of our minds. And now you have it: the meaning for the title buried even deeper into that even more useless of pieces: the foreword. Le Guin was the master of titles in my opinion, since she understood that titles must be descriptive, but should entice the reader to want to know more. The more mundane the words are in a title, then the more intriguing it is. It's about striking the right balance to explain the work and somehow inspire the reader before even opening the book.

Thank you, Ursula K. Le Guin, for inspiring me. Thank you for writing sentences on boring topics so majestically that I read and re-read them – staring at them, admiring them, even ogling them, the way one might a van Gogh, because the majesty of your prose aroused in me the exact feelings you had intended. Thank you for unabashedly being yourself, for that's all one can ever hope to be. Thank you for *Tehanu*, the most beautiful book I never thought I would read. Thank you for helping me realize that I love science fiction and fantasy not for the spaceships and dragons (though I do love those things, don't get me wrong), but rather for the fact that they allow all boundaries to be broken and thereby free us up to explore the wonders of humanity and realms imagination free from the shackles of "reality". Thank you for showing me that even great authors write terrible stories sometimes (I am not a big fan of many of her non-scifi non-fantasy short stories). This isn't to speak ill of the dead, as learning this is very heartening when putting myself out there with my writing, and I thank her for it. It's also important for one's self-esteem. Thank you for all the volumes of yours I have yet to read, for you wrote *a lot* and I have not dedicated as much time as I should have to reading yet in this life.

I would like to finish with a phrase I fancied in my youth when I had the audacity and naiveté to dream of being a poet and tried my hand at it: “Some say a picture paints a thousand words, but I say memories paint more.” It reminds me that I never abandoned my dream; I just put it on hold while I pursued others.

-January 24, 2018 (but revised in bits and pieces since then, because no one gets it perfect the first time)

P.S. – I recently read copious amounts about how both Ursula K. Le Guin and others viewed her works. I had not read much on the topic prior to writing the above, as I usually read (just as I write) for myself, and am not in the habit of regularly seeking out the opinions of others on what I’m reading (or writing). In this case, I am glad I did, as I know that others feel exactly same as I do. Most importantly, I did hear the messages that Le Guin intended her audience to hear, and I heard her messages repeatedly. For that, I am glad, even if she was a self-admitted liar, as all writers of fiction are. However, her self-deprecating confession to being a liar was a veiled irony, as she knew that the truth is a matter of the imagination.

P.P.S. – The insights some authors can have into important philosophical viewpoints never ceases to amaze me, as well as their abilities to beautifully express them using the most simplistic words. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin writes, “There is neither source nor end, for all things are in the Center of Time. As all the stars may be reflected in a round raindrop falling in the night: so too do all the stars reflect the raindrop. There is neither darkness nor death, for all things are, in the Light of the Moment, and their end and their beginning are one.” This is a succinct explanation of the Vedic-based (ie, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.) notion of the oneness of existence. Om.

P.P.P.S – I recently consumed LeGuin’s book on writing, *Steering the Craft*. It made me realize that good writing is both “It was a dark and stormy night” and “The night stormed, consumed by darkness”; *great* writing is finding the balance between the two.

1 Rhonda

He was handsome in a rugged way. The wisps of his beard subtly accented the jawline, giving it just the right angles to complement his bulbous nose. He stared at himself through the tips of his bangs, the blueness of his eyes betraying a sense of disbelief. He had a slight smile at times like these, which only made things worse. He could never forget this face and the pain that it caused him.

He looked away from the mirror, turning his eyes down to the razor blade. He couldn't wait for the surgery that would change his face forever. Seeing this face, *his* face, was unbearable. The underlying pain still felt so real, but he could deal with it. His own reflection was another matter. His face was not simply foreign (that would have been a gift), but it was the very image of hell, tormenting him with every gaze. Small drops of blood dripped into the sink as he meticulously carved a chunk of skin out of his cheek. It didn't hurt as much as he thought it would. This would be easy, and the surgery next week would remove any evidence of his self-flagellation. How did it come to this? Did he deserve *this*? Surely some punishment was warranted, and he had come to accept that, but this was too much. It wasn't really his fault, after all. He never would have agreed to go through with it had he known what was in store for him, that's for sure.

Rhonda awakened from her dream with a scream. She had the feeling it was real, but she couldn't remember any of it.

"Are you OK, honey? Did you have a nightmare again?" her dad said, as both he and her mother rushed into the room. She recognized them, but felt uneasy with their presence after the dream she was having.

"I don't know, daddy. I just feel... kind of afraid, but I can't remember my dream," she said, as the tears were subsiding.

"It's OK, we're here, honey. You know that bad dreams happen and they're just dreams, that's all," her father said, soothing her.

She began to regain some memories of her dream. Her parents were there, but they weren't happy to see her. In fact, they looked mean. No, not mean. Angry, yes, that was it, and...broken. And it was her fault, but she didn't know why. Tears started welling up in her eyes once again as exhaustion overcame her sadness and she returned to a blissful slumber. This time, there were no dreams.

“You’re leaving already? You’re always the last person to leave, Jack. You close down every party!” Francine said, incredulous at his departure, since – like it or not – Jack was always the life of the party, and he commanded a good time.

It was indeed true that Jack would close down almost every party, but he just felt the urge to leave. The roads should be empty right now, and he wanted to see what his new T-12 could do. He went all out on the luxury sports package, and the Shoreline Highway near Francine’s was the perfect place to test it out. He had just made the final bit of special modifications earlier in the day himself, and every second waiting was a lifetime of agony. He was like the young boy who has to wait for batteries to play with his new toy car on his birthday, and playing with *his* new toy car couldn’t wait any longer. It was around 2:30am on a Thursday, so the road should be all his, like it had been so many times before. But this time he had the T-12.

“I know, but I’m just feeling a bit tired tonight, and we have that big afternoon meeting tomorrow, so I really should get some sleep,” Jack stated, doing his most convincing impression of his tired self.

“I don’t believe that for one second. We all saw the videos of what you did last time you were ‘too tired’ to stay to the end,” Francine said, mocking him with a fake yawn of her own. Jack didn’t think his ruse would last, but he thought she might give him the courtesy of slipping out anyway.

“Jack, now I’m serious about this, you’ve had more to drink than you usually do, and even with a stabilizer, you shouldn’t drive on your own. It’s not safe. Just use the autopilot, that’s what it’s made for. Besides, it’s really illegal for you to drive yourself on these roads. No one has died in years from a traffic accident around here due to computer error – it’s always *human* error,” Francine implored him. She was right, of course, but Jack didn’t care. The roads would be clear, he was feeling good, and he had never come close to an accident while he was in control of the wheel.

“Fine, I’ll use the autopilot. But I’m taking the long way and telling it to let loose on the straightaways,” Jack was more convincing this time, or so he hoped.

“Yeah, I’m still not buying it. At least the T-12 is too new to have been hacked and allow full manual control,” Francine taunted Jack. She was right; it was too new to be hacked. But it wasn’t too new to avoid being tricked. He had the best environmental kit installed while he was at work. When activated, the T-12 was convinced it was on a nice, open road with no obstacles or other vehicles around, and a GPS mimicker made it think it was in Montana, where anything was allowed for daytime driving. It also came with predictive simulation, and would generate the right scenery as Jack made his every move behind the wheel. It was highly illegal, but Jack loved the thrill of steering with his own hands and becoming one with a four-wheeled machine. He grew up watching all the classic car chases and heist films from the late 20th century, and he always fantasized about being a getaway driver, weaving in and out of traffic to get away from the cops or the criminal worse than he was that he had just stolen from. He wasn’t stupid and wouldn’t actually do this with other people around, but the mountain curves provided an acceptable replacement, as he could pretend they were out to get him, obstacles to be delicately avoided. Sure, it was a bit childish, but it was his childish dream, and he loved to indulge in it. There was no place he’d rather be than alone on the road, and any risks to have this freedom were worth it.

“Yes, so you know I *can’t* go too crazy tonight. The worst that will happen is that I get overridden and locked out of manual takeover, right? It’ll still be fun. I’m not tired, I just can’t

wait to get back on the road in that car. Did you smell one yet? They made a new car smell even better than they used to!" Jack laughed, as he headed for the door, avoiding any additional admonishment Francine might have thrown at him. He ran to his car, unable to contain his excitement. This was going to be fun.

"You beat the criminal charges, but if we're being honest, it was on a technicality," Jack's attorney told him. He was a good lawyer – the best he could afford, perhaps – but he was also a good man and brutally honest.

"That's what I paid you for, to find those technicalities. All I needed to hear was that it might not have been my fault, and my conscience was cleared," Jack said, and he meant it. He was feeling good, and the slight bit of remorse that had been slowly nibbling at him was gone.

"You might not be so lucky in the civil proceedings, however. They haven't filed a suit yet, since they wanted to wait for the results of the criminal charges, but I don't think they'll let this go. I don't know what's coming or how much they'll ask, but they'll want to see you pay," Lawrence said.

"Let them come after me. I'm nearly broke after having to pay your salary anyway," Jack cracked. It was a lie; before all this he was swimming in debt, and now he was drowning in it.

"Even so, they can come after your future earnings, and you'll barely be able to support yourself. They can ask for a lot of money, and a jury just might give it to them. I'll let you know what they ask for when they come to me with an offer, but be prepared," Lawrence said.

"If there's anything you can do where I don't lose it all, do it. I'm not without sympathy, and their loss is terrible. It just wasn't my fault," Jack replied, and he believed he had convinced himself of this.

Rhonda woke up with barely any recollection of the night before. She remembered she had some bad dreams and her parents came to comfort her, but that was it. There was something about today that excited her. What was it again...it was her birthday! Odd how she forgot that, it being her big one-two. She was finally turning twelve, her final year of being a tween. She was excited, and her parents had a special day of surprises planned for her. They even called her in sick to school to take the day off, something she still couldn't believe. She smelled her special birthday breakfast coming from the kitchen, so she jumped out of bed and raced down the stairs.

"Twelve pancakes! With twelve blueberries in each! Think you can pull it off this year? Last year, you barely made it through, and even more barely kept it down. I know we have this little tradition, but you're old enough to know there's no shame in letting this one go," her mom said.

"Said like a true quitter. Rhon-da! Rhon-da!" her dad said, cheering her on without even removing his gaze from his reading tablet. Her mom was not happy, but she laid the plate down begrudgingly in front of her daughter. Rhonda grabbed her knife and fork and went to work on the pancakes.

"You are your father's daughter," her mother said as she rolled her eyes. "Can you at least stop to take a breath? It's a challenge of endurance, not time."

“But I need to get them all down before the syrup kicks in,” Rhonda choked out as she finished her fourth pancake.

“You don’t need syrup, they’re already sweet enough,” her mom replied, to which Rhonda simply stared back blankly in confusion. The pause was brief, and she went back to the task at hand.

Soon she had downed eight of them. Number nine fell quickly, followed by ten even faster, and she sped up with anticipation as she hit her stride and made quick work of numbers eleven and twelve. She held out her hand expectantly, palm-side up, to her father, her cheeks stuffed with the last bits of syrup-soaked goodness.

“Even I had my doubts this year!” he said as he gave her a very hard five. Her hand didn’t budge.

“Eleven more coming!” he continued, attempting to slap her five again but missing the mark as she deftly pulled her hand out from under his even harder swipe.

“That’s not what I want, old man. Pay up!” Rhonda said, keeping her stone-cold eyes trained on his.

“Again?! You promised me you wouldn’t encourage this, Sam!” her mother said with real anger.

“Come on, Jas! There was no way she was doing it! We still have to wait five minutes for her to keep it down, that was the agreement!” Sam said in his defense, examining Rhonda for any sign of unease. She still did not move.

“Nothing’s coming up. I’m a black hole when it comes to pancakes. Now, pay up! I know you have it!” Rhonda said, quite calmly, with a huge grin overtaking her previously stern look.

“Fine,” her father said, as he took out some bills from his pocket. “One-hundred and forty-four dollars. It’s all there, you can count it,” he said. She had to win this little contest. It was the only time her parents gave her any money of her own to spend as she wanted. She was provided with everything she ever needed and would ever need, and she knew her family had a lot of money, but they lived as if they didn’t. Her parents had decided they wanted to keep things modest, and part of doing that was giving Rhonda only what she needed and deserved, and no 12-year-old needs more money in their pockets than they know what to do with. This one day of the year where she actually got money to spend made her genuinely appreciate the value of it, an interesting side effect of their little yearly wager.

“You know I will, after what you tried to pull when I was five. Two ones and a five do not make twenty-five, no matter what type of logic you try to use,” Rhonda said as she began counting the money over the sticky field of battle. Today would be a good day.

Jack left the car in full autopilot as he left Francine’s and navigated through the city to the highway along the coast. He popped two alcohol stabilizers on the way to neutralize some of the effects from his night of drinking and provide him with a clear head for the drive. Jack was still getting acquainted with the autopilot and the car’s new OS, but he was familiar enough. It wasn’t that long ago that he had his T-10, and only some updating had taken place inside the cabin. He liked the newer seats, as the microfiber felt much warmer in the winter than the simulated leather in his old T-10. The new holographic overlay was much crisper and he hadn’t appreciated how much the technology had advanced until just now. But he wasn’t in this car for the luxuries inside the cabin; he was there for what was under the hood.

The T-12 had a hybrid battery system with a quick-discharge battery to maximize its acceleration, making it the only production car easily available that could go from 0-60mph in under a second. It didn't stop there, as it could keep going to 200mph almost as quickly given the right conditions. Jack couldn't wait to make it to his stretch of highway, the one he owned on nights like these. Even with its slight curves, it was the perfect place to unleash the power of his new toy. Yes, tonight was definitely going to be fun.

"You're not going to like this, but there's a way you can get out of this for next-to-nothing," Lawrence told Jack.

"What's not to like? If I can get out of this and keep my money, all the better. What is it? A countersuit? Blame it on the companies? It didn't work for the criminal case, but could it work here?" Jack asked. He really just wanted to avoid going into even more debt. He was able to take out a few large personal loans, financed by his high paycheck and likely future earnings. He was about \$80,000 in the hole with only around another \$40,000 to burn in credit before he hit a limit he would not be able to return from.

"No...I told you. You're not going to like it," Lawrence said, losing all sense of the joviality that normally peppered his speech.

"What is it? Wait...no...I've heard...a 'memory machine'?" Jack faltered as it dawned on him.

"You said if I could do anything to prevent you from losing it all, go for it. I didn't suggest it, Jack, *they* did. They don't want the money. It turns out they're better off than you might have thought, given the car they were driving. I had someone look into their finances, and they're filthy rich. My guy found at least \$80,000,000 in liquid assets alone. They have enough money to carry on a lawsuit for a long time – they could follow you with lawsuits into the grave. They want it, Jack, not more money. All they've asked for is a retrograde artificial memory implant. If you accept the deal, you'll be done with all of this in a month. The contract they've proposed is simple and clear. This would be it," Lawrence explained.

"No, not that. Have you heard the stories of the people that use those things? Those memory machines are not good. Even people that *want* it regret doing it. Would this settlement even be binding? It's so new," Jack asked.

"It has held up so far in the handful of civil suits that it's been a part of. It's not a criminal issue any more, Jack. It's about them getting what they want out of this. If we make sure the contract is drafted right, it will work. They don't appear to be pulling any tricks here. This is what they want, and they're being very reasonable," Lawrence continued, with his tone gaining some of its spark back.

"That scares me even more then, Larry. What the hell would they have in mind? They could get anything from me, and they ask for *this*? I don't like it. Not at all," Jack said.

"Now, Jack, I want you to think about it. You can set some of the parameters. All you have to do is request modifications to the contract, and we'll see what they say. If it's not acceptable, then we won't accept it. You can still get some control over this," Lawrence told him.

"I'll have to sleep on it, but for now, the answer is no," Jack stated.

The pancakes were sitting like a lump in her stomach, but Rhonda wouldn't let her father know. She couldn't show any sign of weakness or her mother might put an end to the tradition once and for all, rather than merely feigning to like she always did. Rhonda didn't know what was planned for the day, but she knew it would be memorable, as her birthdays always were. They told her to get ready and be in the car in fifteen minutes, and that's what she did. She sat in the back, patiently awaiting her parents. This year, she hadn't figured out where they were going. Most kids want a big party with all their friends, but not Rhonda. She relished being an only child, and her birthdays were where her parents shined. She received her share of attention, but her parents were often busy sitting on boards or managing companies or whatever it was they did when they went to "work". It was boring stuff Rhonda only cared about because it kept them away from her, but they always made sure to be there for her on her birthday, without even taking a business call or checking emails.

"We only have three stops this year, but that's because the last one counts for ten," her mother said.

"What?! I think you got lazy this year. Last year you were brilliant with the eleven you came up with, and this year you can't even come up with more than three?! Come on, mom," she joked. Unlike the pancakes which she counted to make sure there weren't more than were necessary, she really didn't care how many things she got or what they did. A day of fun with her parents was enough of a gift for her.

"Think she'll figure it out?" Jas asked her husband.

"Nah, let's just get going. She'll see when we get there," Sam said.

Rhonda sat in the back seat, thinking. What would count for ten stops? The first was going to be the kite park. They only went once a year, and she loved it. They made her a new kite every year, and each year she destroyed it. Totally worth it. She had some time to figure out the final stop, since they would be headed to lunch after going to the park. What would the last stop be? What could count for ten stops in one?

"Well, we assume you know the first stop. Want it now or when we get there?" Jas asked her daughter as the car backed out of the driveway.

"You know I can't wait once you ask. Let me have it now," Rhonda said, resigning herself to her own impatience. She never could wait.

"It's in the trunk. Just reach through the seat," her mom said.

"I can't get it open," Rhonda said, pulling the center seat as hard as she could. The car was getting old, and the latch that released an access panel for the trunk would stick sometimes.

"Sam, I told you to get that fixed. Wasn't that latch part of the recall?" Jas chided him.

"Yeah, but it's just a latch. It doesn't matter," Sam said.

"Still, you should get it fixed, along with all those other things they've recalled," Jas said.

"Hey, this is my birthday. No nagging each other. Or kissing!" Rhonda commanded from the back seat, wagging her finger at them.

"Yes, dear," they said in unison.

Yes, today would be a good day, Rhonda said again to herself.

Jack was rounding the last corner before the straightaway. The road was empty, as it always was at this time. He turned on most of his special modifications while the autopilot was

still running to test them and ensure everything was running properly. Just ahead was about a mile of completely straight road where he could build up some speed for the course ahead. After the straightaway, the road zigged and zagged just enough to keep drivers engaged, a lesson from the early autobahns in Germany and a crash-prevention relic of the past, when long, straight roads would put human drivers to sleep with no automated safety systems to protect them. A road that is too straight is boring, and one too winding keeps speeds low, so he loved this road for striking the perfect balance. Plus, there was a full moon, and the coast looked amazing on a night like this. Assuming all of his modifications worked properly, the night's drive would be what he had always dreamed of. Jack struggled and tried to motivate himself to turn off his video cameras to avoid any evidence this time, but he couldn't do it. At the very least, he'd have to watch it again himself. He sat back and enjoyed the view, waiting for his turn behind the wheel as all systems checked out and the car accelerated faster than normal on its own, seeming to itch for the thrill itself.

Jack thought about the offer all night, lying awake as would be expected of anyone in such a position. He knew they wouldn't wait long for a response, and he was afraid they'd pull it off the table in the morning, instead going after everything he had, likely a far worse punishment for him than whatever they were planning. Would it be that bad if he did what they were asking? The experiences were quite mixed. For the people that wanted it, some say it changed their lives for the better; others said it changed them for the worse. They all agreed it was an experience they could never forget. For those who went with the retrograde artificial memory implantation "involuntarily" for retribution (he found at least seven people that he could establish had gone through it), it wasn't as clear. Some claimed to be able to dissociate, but they may have been sociopaths devoid of any real emotions to begin with. Jack had been accused of being a sociopath before, but he had feelings. He just didn't care for them.

He did actually feel a little bad for what happened, but it wasn't entirely his fault, and the justice system had agreed to that much. No one would be in this situation if *they* had just done what *they* were supposed to do, so *they* shared some of the blame with him. Of course *they* didn't see it that way, but it was the truth. What did they have in mind for the memory machine? Would he be able to get through it? Coming out of a regular civil trial with the shirt still on his back was unlikely, since he wasn't exactly blameless in what had happened. How much would he have to pay out anyway if they went that route? It didn't matter; he wouldn't be able to pay it, and he could find no way out without forfeiting nearly all of his future earnings. Jack loved his money and his things, and he had mental fortitude. He could get through a memory machine, he was sure of it.

He did a fair amount of research online scouring discussion forums to get ideas for what he should request, and he began laying out all the constraints for the retrograde memory. He definitely didn't want to die, or be tortured as a part of it. He didn't want it to be longer than six months, as that seemed to be the longest memory stretch where it was still possible to dissociate from them. Additionally, experiences longer than six months tended to have some very bad effects (such as causing the person to constantly doubt the veracity of all memories, even real ones less than 5 minutes old), no matter who they were and what the experiences were. He put in some other standard clauses he had seen: he would be physically and mentally healthy during it and any "horror" scenarios were off the table. He didn't dare include a clause preventing the

presence of scorpions, since that might tip them off to his extreme fear and give them ideas. He hammered out a few more constraints that were recommended and prepared the list for Lawrence. He already had an afternoon meeting set with him, so maybe they could get this resolved sooner than later.

As he was about to send his demands, he paused to think about what they might have in mind for him, in case he had missed something. Perhaps he could throw a wrench into their plans if he could predict what they wanted to do. But what would they be thinking? He thought about where they were coming from and what their motivations might be. He thought about what he might do if he were in their shoes, and gave his best shot at empathizing with them. What would it feel like to have that happen? Under what circumstances would he ask for this punishment instead of money? It was difficult, but he dug deep into his memories and emotions for a time where he felt broken. He went back to his youth and recalled the worst times of his life, visiting the dungeons of his psyche and awakening feelings long forgotten. He found what he was searching for: *mutterseelenallein*. This was why he closed himself off emotionally to the world in the first place: if you're always alone, then feeling lonely is normal. The word doesn't translate into English well, as "languishing in loneliness" doesn't do it justice. Only the German language can have a word that literally means "mother's soul alone," where you are so alone that not even your mother's soul will come to comfort you. His 10-year-old self found the word while battling adolescent depression brought about by that common loneliness one feels when uninvited to a perceived friend's party: the feeling that world would collapse on your chest if they both weren't so empty. *Mutterseelenallein*. And he had made others feel this.

A sudden wave of guilt came over him. He didn't like these feelings – of guilt and despair and anguish – and finally understood why they requested the memory machine. He had appeared cold and removed at all of their meetings. In truth, he was, and it wasn't just a show. His lack of compassion must have bothered them. The person that hurt them so much showed no remorse. They wanted him to feel what they felt. That had to be it. They were going through their own personal hells, and they wanted him to go there with them, follow them into a pit of despair. If this is what they want, then he'll give it to them. If this would make things even, he could oblige. He could survive hell, so long as he wasn't bankrupt. This way, he would still win. They would get what they want and give him a punishment, but a punishment is no punishment if it doesn't hurt, if it doesn't bring actual retribution. And Jack was confident nothing they could do to him in the memory machine could harm him. Perhaps he could come out on top with this arrangement.

People reported that the more someone was susceptible to intense emotions, the more real the retrograde memories felt. After the perceived abandonment by his friends in his youth (he had actually been invited, but just had never received the invitation) and the pain it brought, Jack vowed to quash all strong feelings – empathy, sadness, jealousy, and even happiness – as no good could come from them. His coldness would make whatever memory they had for him tolerable, and he became increasingly more confident that he could survive the memory machine with no lasting impact. He suddenly had an idea that might make the whole process smoother for everyone. Perhaps he could sway their decision to accept the conditions of his counter-offer and get this all resolved sooner than later and in his favor if he "accidentally" hit "Reply All" to a message that had included the other attorney's assistant. As long as there were no scorpions, he would be fine. After sending a believable email detailing what he really wanted alongside those things that he would like but weren't deal-breakers, he finally slept deeply for a few hours, awaking in the early afternoon just in time to make it to Lawrence's office.

“They’ve come back to us and said they will only meet four of your requests: you won’t die, you won’t be tortured, you won’t have to re-live what happened, and they came in way under your required time period, as they’re just asking for a single day. I didn’t tell them that those were the only four you wouldn’t do without, so I don’t know if they got lucky or somehow got a hold of that information. I know their attorney is good, but he’s not *that* good, so maybe someone working for me leaked the info to them. You’re not a very popular person, but I don’t think anyone here would violate your confidentiality and risk their job like that,” he told Jack.

“I told them,” Jack said.

“But why would you do that?” Lawrence asked with his voice arching up into a high pitch of puzzlement. He was genuinely intrigued, but more importantly, he was surprised, a rare gift for someone to give him.

“I had some time to think about it, and I finally understand what they think I’ve done to them. I figured I could delicately steer everything into my favor by giving them that email. Remember that negotiation is part of my job. If what they’ve proposed will appease them, then so be it. I’ll still be alive when it’s all done, and I know I can handle whatever they’re planning. If they think this is a just punishment, then call it my fair penance. And I won’t be broke, or broken, after all of this,” Jack replied. It was one of the first times in his life he almost took responsibility for something he had done. He didn’t like it.

“Besides, they’ve just asked for one day. How hard could that be?” saying this brightened his spirits, and Jack started to feel good about his decision.

Rhonda thought more about it on the drive to the kite park. Ten points in one stop, what could it be? Ten...wait a second, could they? Did they actually listen? Would they actually *go*? Would they actually let *me* go? No way! How did they get tickets? It couldn’t be, but she had to act like she hadn’t figured it out. If she were wrong, she’d just be disappointed, and make her parents feel bad for not doing it. It’d be a challenge, but she’d keep her excitement in.

“OK, let’s get the kite out, since the latch won’t open...again!” Jas said.

“Mom, you promised me,” Rhonda reminded.

Rhonda got out of the car, went to the trunk, and saw the kite. It was awesome, and only confirmed what she thought the final stop would be: a purple dragon. She calmed herself as she grabbed it and headed to the top of the hill. Flying the kite was great, like always, and she destroyed it with a crash into the ground, like always. Only this time, it took over an hour. A new record. After wrecking the kite, they meandered through the rest of the park and its attractions, taking their time to allow their appetites to recover after the ceremoniously heavy birthday breakfast.

When their stomachs were ready for another beating in the early afternoon, they finally headed to get lunch. The second stop was her favorite ice cream shop (dessert before lunch!), which was attached to a restaurant, so it counted as a single stop instead of two. The final stop had to be the concert. It would take at least three hours to get there, and another hour to park, get to their seats, an hour to get some merchandise, etc., and they had just enough time to do that. The Purple Dragons were her favorite band, and they were headlining the “10 on 10-10 at 10:10 at 10,010” concert. It was 10 bands (really, only the Purple Dragons mattered) on October 10 (her birthday!) starting at 10:10pm at 10,010 feet, on the summit of Mt. Hilt (her favorite peak!). It was the biggest concert of the year in her mind. Each opening act would only play for 30

minutes, while the Dragons would have a full 90 minutes for their show. Six hours of nonstop music on the newly renovated 3-tiered rotating stage, allowing for no downtime and no breaks. It would be the latest she ever stayed up, and she knew she could do it. It would also be her first grown-up concert, and her heart started to race at the prospects that lie ahead of her. Her parents were finally treating her like a grown-up to a grown-up show. She'd have to stop calling herself a grown-up now, since only a child would call herself a grown-up.

"Did you figure it out?" her mom asked. Rhonda let out a huge smile. "Of course you did."

It was time now. Jack came to a stop at the start of the straightaway and gave the commands to turn on the final bits of the system he installed. The autopilot shut off on cue just as planned. Everything seemed good as all the warning lights for manual control popped up but were systematically comforted by his mods, and he had full control of his vehicle.

"Let's see what you can do," he said to his car, checking all around to make sure that there was no one near. Of course there wasn't, there never was on this road at this time of night. It was the very scenic route, and no one took it at this hour on a weekday. He pushed the pedal to the floor and the silent silver beast took off like lightning into the night. He hit the first curve in less than half a minute, taking it while traveling over 100mph, and gunned it into the next straightaway. It was exhilarating.

He wound his way around each turn, getting more confident every time, drifting into the opposing lanes as he fought to maintain control. Some of the safety systems were still on, so he wasn't going to crash or go off the cliff. He wasn't stupid; just a thrill seeker. The last turn before he would hit his first stoplight was approaching. He had to see how fast he could go. He pushed the pedal to the metal...130...140...150...160...170! The turn was coming up really fast now, and he was about to slow down when some lights suddenly appeared from around the bend and blinded him. He was literally stuck between the proverbial rock, as a giant rock jutted out of the sea and towered over the road, and a hard place, as the mountainside went almost straight up on the other side of the road. Tricking the GPS meant that his car was invisible to others using GPS tracking (unless there happened to be someone else in the middle of nowhere in Montana where he "was") and other cars were invisible to his. The automatic crash avoidance precautions had their limits even though he had kept this last layer of protection active. The safety protocols would kick in if an object were detected in very close proximity to the car, and do what they could to avoid serious bodily harm. Crashing into the mountainside or through the guard rail and over the cliff were too dangerous. There wasn't enough time for anything drastic, and the crash avoidance system deemed that the safest option for the inhabitants of both vehicles was hitting the brakes hard, turning to the passenger side since it was empty, and slamming into the oncoming car. The safety belts and cushioning systems in both cars should ensure only mild damage to the occupants, with less than a 2% chance of death, assuming all passengers were of average health.

He didn't expect the crash to be so deafening, but he had never really thought what being in a car accident would sound like. The T-12 had the best crash resistance systems on the market, and he seemed fairly intact. Through the ringing in his ears and echoes of the crash replaying in his head, he made out the muffled screams of a woman.

“Have you ever done it?” Henry asked.

“Yes, you?” Paul replied.

“No way! You know I’m creeped out by all this stuff still even though I’ve been here two months now. No one ever seems right when they’re done with it,” Henry said.

“You’re right, it changes you. I only did it because I wanted to see what these people are going through. I picked one of the shorter, simpler ones, guaranteed not to mess me up. I wanted to try something I’d never actually be able to do, but I didn’t want to go to space. The idea of not being on Earth and having to travel into space just creeps me out. I’ve always been a fan of scuba diving, so I went with the dive into the hydrothermal vents in the Pacific. You get to go there yourself, I even took the form of a merman – yeah, laugh it up, but being a merman *was awesome* – and you get to swim around and see all the crazy stuff up close and experience scalding heat without the actual pain or damage,” Paul paused as he said this, touching his face where he remembered nearly getting burned by the heat of one of the larger vents.

“It’s not that expensive to do it for real. We all pitched in and got my uncle a trip to the Mariana Trench. I mean, he wasn’t a mermaid, but I suppose we could have bought him one of those mermaid tails. Might have been hard to find it in his size, since he’s a big guy. Do they make mermaid things for adult men?” Henry replied, choking in his laughter.

“*Merman*. I don’t care what you think, it was awesome. I’d never have a way of getting enough money to take a trip like that, and our version is a top-seller, so I thought, ‘Why not?’ I didn’t learn the answer until I was done. The most disconcerting part is that you don’t feel like you were out at all. Five minutes of your life just disappear in what literally feels like a blink of an eye, but suddenly you have the full memories of it all as if you just lived it. You don’t see it or experience it sequentially, and it’s not like you live through it. I didn’t feel like I was swimming around down there, I had just *felt* like I had swam around. It’s just suddenly one more thing you can recall from the depths of your mind. It was really weird – one second I was here, never having been to the Pacific, and the next instant I was awake with a full memory of grabbing giant tube worms with my bare hands. I could relive it or not, just like any other memory. It felt so real, and it really was as if it were *me* experiencing it, and it’s still stronger and more vivid than any other memory I have. I can still taste the sulfur in my mouth and smell rotten eggs in my nose, but I know I wasn’t there. It’s not like a movie, but it’s more than just a memory. They still haven’t figured out how to properly dampen the emotional elements yet, either. I’d hate to experience fear, anger, anxiety, pain, hate, or anything like that in there. The heat I felt in this spot where I was nearly burned – well, where I remember being nearly burned – on my cheek still feels fresh. Those adrenaline junkies that go in for the horror experiences are insane. You don’t even realize it happened at first and think they aborted it all, but then...I don’t know, you just don’t feel right,” Paul said, with a tinge of regret about his choice to partake in the memory machine.

“You don’t need to tell me that. We see it every day. That’s why I won’t do it. I wouldn’t work here if they didn’t pay us so well. What’s this next guy have in store?” Henry asked, looking over the paperwork. “It doesn’t say.”

“I don’t know, but he’s not going to like it. I don’t think he knows what he’s gotten himself into. It’s a custom one, just for him. Something to do with a settlement. This is that guy that killed that little girl in the crash,” Paul said as he continued to ready the machine.

“Which guy? You know I pay no attention to the news,” Henry said.

“He was taking his new decked out T-12 for a drive on the coast highway and had it modded to drive in a faked full-manual control mode. He had a few drinks and went crazy on the road there, eventually hitting 170mph and crashing into a family driving home from a concert. His car was hacked and cam footage was leaked online. It was insane until it was just sad. The little girl had fallen asleep on her father’s shoulders on the walk to their car after a concert, so he laid her down to sleep on the back seat with no seat belts. Who wears them any more anyway? No one ever gets into a car accident these days. Neither saw the other car coming around the curve and this guy going nuts in his T-12 hit them head on. All of them that were wearing belts were fine, of course, but not the little girl. And on her birthday! Anyway, they were driving an older car that was subject to a few recalls they never got fixed, so because of that and the fact the girl wasn’t strapped in, the guy was able to plead down to a few misdemeanor charges for modding the car and driving unsafely in manual mode, as his lawyer claimed the accident would not have been deadly if the girl were secured and the autopilot properly maintained. The car manufacturers supported this, as admitting any fault in their vehicles would open them up to plenty of lawsuits. The guy is guilty as hell in my book, but I don’t know if he deserves what he’s about to get. The family made some arrangement with him where, instead of suing for money, he agreed to get a retrograde memory of their choosing, subject to certain conditions he laid out. Still...the punishment memories that people get inside these are worse than anything I could ever come up with,” Paul replied, and he was genuinely saddened by the prospects of what was about to happen.

“How are you an expert on this guy?” Henry asked, surprised by his extremely detailed accounting of the events from memory.

“I saw the footage when it first leaked, and I just had to keep up with the case. Morbid curiosity, you can call it. Then when I heard of the memory machine settlement, I read through everything in more detail. It’s part of our job, man. You should know this stuff,” Paul said, knowing his admonishment wouldn’t matter.

“They really went all out with this one,” Paul continued. “He’s having the ‘clean’ experience – he’s not going in as himself. He’s going to genuinely feel like he was a different person for a chunk of his life, but it’s all going to feel eerily too real. They’re even implanting some additional memories – non-experience memories – to give this experience a full backstory and everything. Wonder if it will work this time or not. Go to sleep one person, wake up with the memories of two. It’s a real mindscrew.”

“Shouldn’t being a different person make it easier for him to dissociate from the memories later on?” Henry inquired.

“It actually makes it worse as far as I’ve seen. The extent of mind alteration required to pull it off means the memories and everything are even stronger than normal. My ‘trip’ to the deep sea vents is the strongest, most present memory I have, and I can’t do anything to change it, even though I got the lightest experience we offer. He’s never going to forget what happens in there, especially how he feels during it all. In fact, he’ll probably never be able to put it out of his mind. When he wakes up, he’ll feel the emotions contained in the memory about a thousand times stronger than he normally feels things. On top of this, it will always be fresh in his mind. Every image, every conversation, every thought, every tear...every moment he’s awake when we’re done, he’ll see it and feel it. It will also probably haunt his dreams,” Paul said.

Jack came into the room after going through the orientations and preparations for the memory machine. It didn’t take long to get him fully hooked in, and Paul broke the eerie silence that had overcome the room during the process.

“They have left you one last civility: you get to choose your name for the experience. I suggest you to pick something you won’t associate with – some people say it makes it easier to forget what happens in there,” Paul advised, feeling some pity for the man.

“Civility...right. Let’s get on with it,” Jack said, as he tried to get comfortable. They began the general anesthetic and he slowly began to lose consciousness, remaining silent. It was a slow fall into the abyss that lay below him. Jack didn’t know what name to choose, and didn’t much care. He didn’t think it would make a difference anyway, so he’d just let the guy pick one for him. He had perhaps waited too long to say anything anyway, as he was starting to become light-headed. In his delirium, he saw the faces of her parents as they had appeared in court. Her mother had long black hair that looked almost silver when the light bounced off it. She had a round face, but pronounced cheekbones. Her skin was dark and flawless, and her green eyes shone through her glasses: an emerald color that was even more vibrant against the red, raw skin of her eyelids. Her father was a rather handsome man. He had thinning blonde hair, but it covered his head in just the right places. His brown eyes stared into nothingness and his lips were neither full nor thin, but just right. He saw their faces clearly. Angry and broken and alone, they would forever remind him of his crime, staring at him through eyes that were cried out. With the effects of the sedatives working into his mind, his conscious control over his emotions weakened and he found himself suddenly overcome with remorse and began to panic. He tried to shout for help, but his voice was fading...help me! Help me! Out of an old corner of his memory, from his childhood listening to music with his grandfather, a tune from the Beach Boys snuck into his consciousness.

“Help me, Rhonda, help, help me...Rhonda...” he whispered, as his eyes closed for the last time.

“Sweet dreams, Rhonda,” Paul said, punching the name into the memory machine just as Jack entered the first stages of the retrograde artificial memory implantation.

The concert was everything Rhonda thought it would be. It was cold, but it was worth it. The full moon and clear sky meant it was the perfect backdrop for a perfect night. She had only ever been to the summit in the winter to go skiing, and the resort’s owners decided they wanted to expand their offerings in an attempt to boost their off-season income, so they constructed a venue with a stadium-quality stage for a county fair size audience, making the experience grand but intimate for every concertgoer. The Purple Dragons played all of her favorite songs, and it was just after 4:00am when they finished. She couldn’t believe she was still awake, but she couldn’t sleep from all the excitement. Her exhaustion was beginning to catch up with her and she worried she might actually fall asleep while walking.

“I know it’s not my birthday anymore and I’m twelve now, but can I get on your shoulders one last time? I promise I won’t fall asleep,” Rhonda begged of her father.

“Of course you can, and I’ll just keep poking you to make sure you’re awake,” he said as he scooped her up onto his shoulders, knowing full well that she’d not be able to keep that promise. She was still just small enough to fit on his frame, and he realized this might actually be the last time she did this.

They were passing by their favorite lookout on their way to the car, and decided to stop for a minute. Rhonda was just about asleep when she noticed how perfectly the full moon was hanging over the mountains on the other side of the valley. Looking down, Rhonda finally

noticed that her mother was beautiful for the first time. Of course, she had to believe she was beautiful since she was her mother, but she finally actually saw it for the first time.

Her mother had long black hair that looked almost silver in the moonlight. She had a round face, but pronounced cheekbones. Her skin was dark and flawless, and her green eyes shone through her glasses; an emerald color so strong the color could be seen even in the dead of night. She looked down at her father, and even from above, she could tell that he was a looker, too. She felt awkward thinking it, but she did think her dad was handsome. He had thinning blonde hair that gave her just enough to hold on to, and it fell perfectly on his forehead. His brown eyes always carried an air of kindness, and his lips were neither full nor thin, but just right. Her parents made a great couple, and they seemed more in love right now than they ever had been, holding hands and pausing to enjoy the beauty of the moment.

“Let me down, baldy,” Rhonda said as she pulled on a small tuft of her father’s hair. He obliged.

“Ok, I’ll take back what I said earlier. I will allow you one kiss, right now, under this moon, and I will be the photographer. Make the kiss short, since I don’t want to look at it longer than I have to,” Rhonda ordered her parents.

“Your birthday is over, we don’t have to listen to you anymore,” her mother said as she grabbed her father, walked over to the edge of the overlook, and shared a passionate kiss with him. Rhonda was trying to frame the picture just right, eliminating everyone else from the crowded scene from her picture, when someone ran into her left shoulder.

“Hey, watch– ” she blurted out when a man in a green jacket smashed past her in a blur. He was spinning, as if drunk, and stumbling and running at the same time.

Rhonda was paralyzed when she witnessed what happened next. She wanted to move, but couldn’t bring herself to. She couldn’t look away, knowing what was going to happen, and the brutal fact she was helpless to stop the events that were set in motion froze her entire body.

“You can’t catch me!” the man in the green jacket laughed as he continued to speed through the crowd, pursued by some unknown assailant. He meticulously made his way around more people, a dangerous game to be playing in such a crowd. The ground was icy in parts, as the mist was beginning to freeze on the ground. He lost his footing just as he was approaching the railing on the edge of the cliff and slipped, flying straight at her embracing parents. They had no chance, and never saw him coming.

Rhonda was pulled away by a woman just before she made it to the edge. She needed to see what happened. Could they be fine? How far down was it? Why did the woman grab her like that? She was barely able to slip away from her firm grasp and looked over the railing. Her parents lied at the bottom, motionless, still in their embrace. Rhonda couldn’t tell if there was any blood since it was too far below, but she thought she saw a glimmer of moonlight reflect from around their bodies. She turned to find the man who did this, wiping away her tears so that she could see him. She was full of fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, and loneliness to an extent she never imagined was possible. She needed to see who did this. Where was that green jacket? She needed to find it. Needed to see who did this to her, to her parents. She searched through the crowd for that green jacket and found it. And the face that went with it.

His face was handsome in a rugged way. The wisps of his beard subtly accented the jawline, giving it just the right angles to complement his bulbous nose. He stared out through the tips of his bangs, the blueness of his eyes betraying a sense of disbelief. He had a slight smile at times like these, which only made things worse. She could never forget this face and the pain that it caused her, wrapping her in the cold embrace of consuming loneliness: *mutterseelenallein*.

2 Daydream Believer

The pain in his head was intense and omnipresent. It was a new kind of pain, something so overwhelming it took a moment for him to recognize there might be existence beyond it. He tried opening his eyes, but the small amount of light he absorbed somehow took him deeper into the depths of despair. All of his senses were still swirling about as he tried to get a focus on anything that wasn't pain. Slowly he began to regain some semblance of awareness, but he could just tell that he was alive, with no concept of where he was, what he was, or even *who* he was. He was still able to discern which way was up, crawled to a wall, and took a seat against it as he attempted to deafen the ringing that was invading his every organ. But then, just as suddenly as it had arrived, the pain was gone, all at once and completely. His faculties returned, though some grogginess remained.

He opened his eyes slowly, worrying that the torturous aching would suddenly creep back into his mind again. It didn't, and he glanced around the room, squinting, while his eyes adapted to the light. He was in a bedroom, but it wasn't his. It was nondescript and there were no pictures or personal artifacts anywhere. It was a very nice room, but it felt foreign to him. As he moved to get up, he realized that he was holding something in his hand. He carefully unrolled his fingers and found that he was gripping an empty syringe with the label "DB" on it. Save for alcohol, he wasn't into recreational chemicals – and definitely not something that would do this – so he hadn't a clue of what it could be.

He eventually regained a state of normal lucidity after only a minute, and recognized that he was in a hotel room, but he couldn't remember how he got there or what happened in the past day. In fact, a lot of his memory felt fuzzy. He once again knew who he was, what he looked like, where he lived, where he worked, and who his friends and family were, but the details of much of the recent past and even where he was Tuesday one month ago eluded him. There seemed to be pockets of darkness in the sunshine of his memories. He decided to look around the room for any information and found a hotel keycard, his wallet, and his phone sitting on the end table near the bed. He picked up his phone and unlocked it. Instead of his normal screen, a video popped up, and it was himself.

"Hi, future me! It's yourself, William, from yesterday. I'm about to take some crazy stuff tomorrow, so I just want to tell you that this is on purpose and you'll be fine. Just sit back and enjoy yourself! I bet this is totally trippy, right? You know it's you talking to yourself, but you don't remember doing this, do you? You'll feel better by the end of the day, I promise, so just try to put the uneasiness out of your mind. Everything is covered for you here, so you don't have a thing to worry about. This place is amazing! Oh, and don't try to unlock the phone any more. It is set in a lockdown mode that you'll remember how to open up after all of this is over. If you try too many times to unlock it, it will erase itself and go into a complete lockdown mode. You can

take pictures and videos with it to document things, but that's it. It's all part of the fun!" he said while standing near a pool and having a very good time, but present William had no memory of any of it. The date stamp on it said it was recorded yesterday at 4:28pm, and while he was apt to believe himself, he wasn't put at any ease, and definitely didn't see how this was "fun".

William opened the window to see where he was. If he was stuck in a place with no clue as to where and why he was there, then he couldn't have chosen a better place. He was in a second-floor room with a balcony overlooking a white sand beach with pristine blue waters. The sight was so beautiful, he did what came naturally and took a picture with his phone, having to then consciously fight the urge to try and unlock it again. There was no regular phone in his room, of course. There was also no computer, television, or even a clock. Except for his cell phone and the lights, there didn't appear to be anything that utilized electricity.

He opened the balcony and sat on one of the chairs, pondering what to do. He was a fan of games, and was wondering if he went in for one of those "Extreme Murder Mystery" experiences that involved a healthy dose of temporary amnesia. No, those were too expensive to do, and he wouldn't have had that video explaining where he was, according to what he knew about them. Maybe he was abducted? Part of an elaborate scam? He just had to wait it out if he was to trust himself, but exactly how long would that be? Just a few hours or until he fell asleep (if he could even sleep)? Though he had looked at his phone repeatedly, he hadn't actually taken note of the time, and didn't know whether the sun was setting or rising. He glanced back at his phone to see that it was 8:42am, finally realized that his stomach was growling and that he was quite hungry (confirming the accuracy of the time), and decided he ought to get out and explore this place. From what he observed from his balcony, it appeared that he was indeed at an all-inclusive resort of the types he had been to before, so he grabbed his keycard and wandered out, making sure to note he was in room 241, worried he might forget it, and wrote it down on the card itself. His unease remained as he opened the door to the ominous presence of emptiness. The hallway was long and brightly lit, but revealed no truths from its paintings and closed doors. William cautiously stepped out of his door and started walking down the corridor, following its right turn into a staircase. As he descended the staircase down to a grand lobby, a couple was walking up the stairs past him.

"I can't believe we have to go back tomorrow. I wish we could stay here for at least another week," the woman said to the man next to her.

"I wish that our honeymoon never ends," he said as he gave her a kiss.

After the very convincing performance the newlyweds put on, he surmised that either the entire place was an elaborate ruse or everything really was as he had told himself in the video. Thus far, nothing seemed out of place except himself. Regardless of what was going on, it appeared safe and normal enough. He decided that, for now, he'd behave as if everything *were* normal until things weren't.

A sign at the bottom of the stairs had an arrow that pointed to the left and said "Breakfast served from 7:30am-10:30am. Seat yourself and a waiter will be with you shortly." He followed the instructions, taking a small table near the window. The menu was handwritten on a chalkboard that had been so used it was almost as white as the sand on the beach. He could just make out "Poached eggs with fresh-caught steamed fish on a toasted baguette" as one of the options. Sounded perfect for him, and he requested one with a cup of coffee when the waiter quickly appeared, precisely as the sign promised.

He took his time enjoying breakfast, thinking about what to do next. He had initially thought to explore the recreational options at the resort, but seeing as he had no clue why he was

there, he thought it would be easier to play it safe and stick close to the bar and even closer to the beach. He may as well just wait it out until the reason he was there arrived.

After breakfast and a few cups of coffee, he explored the ground floor of the hotel a little bit more and eventually found his way to a beach bar. It was only around 10:30am, but it felt like the right time to start drinking. He ordered a mimosa (which is, for some reason, one of only two acceptable alcoholic drinks to have before noon, the other being a Bloody Mary) and took up a spot on a shady stool at the edge of the bar nearest the ocean. There were very few people at the beach, and he began thinking maybe it wouldn't be that bad of a day. It's almost like a nice dream, he thought, and for a second he wondered if maybe he were actually dreaming. It would make sense, but this would have been the most realistic and longest dream he'd ever had. Whatever was going on, he had *literally* told himself it would be over soon.

William lazily finished his drink and decided to go for a swim. The water was the perfect temperature and the waves were small. There was a long shelf on this beach, so he walked out until he could finally swim and barely see the ocean floor. He estimated it must have been at least a quarter-mile from the shore, but it didn't matter much. William fell prostrate onto his back, floating with the sun glaring through his eyelids. He remained in this position for quite a while until an errant wave interrupted his waking sleep, forcing him to decide that it was time for a bite to eat and perhaps another drink. More people were arriving at his semi-private beach, but he thought the company might be a good distraction. William went to take up his old perch at the bar, only to find a woman occupying the stool right next to it. Perhaps she would stay and chat, perhaps not, but either way he wanted to take the seat he had quickly grown oddly attached to.

"Desert Sunrise with extra grenadine," the bartender said as he set the drink down between the two of them.

"Wow, impressive. How did you know-" William began to say when the woman grabbed the drink and took a sip.

"Oh, would you like one, too?" the bartender asked, a little surprised that he was about to take the drink the woman had just ordered.

"Um, yes, that would be quite nice," William replied.

"Were you trying to steal my drink?" the woman asked William.

"I thought it was for me. It's my favorite drink. I call it a-"

"*Dessert Sunrise*?" the woman said, expectantly.

"Yes, but how did you know that?" William said, quite astonished.

The woman let out a hearty laugh. "Because that's what I call it! What a coincidence! This is the least appreciated drink out there, and he makes them perfectly. I'd tip him well, maybe more, but it's all inclusive here," she declared, eying the bartender.

He assumed that she must be here alone, too, or at least not very attached. On second thought, he decided he couldn't read anything into her flirting with a handsome bartender, and decided to test the waters himself.

"I'm William," he said, extending his hand. She had a look about her that put him at ease, and he found her quite attractive, even though he wasn't entirely sure why. She wasn't his usual "type" but he didn't seem to mind. He had this strange feeling they had met before, and wondered if they actually had.

"Cindy," she replied in kind, taking his hand.

"One more," the bartender interrupted as he put down William's drink. "Anything to eat?"

"I believe I saw an appetizer with chips and a few types of dips. We'll take one," William requested, looking to Cindy for a response. She affirmed the request with a nod and settled into her seat.

"Are you here alone?" William asked.

"Not anymore," she said. William couldn't help but let out a little grin.

"Are you here alone?" she asked as well.

"I think so. Yesterday was apparently one hell of a day, since I don't remember much," he answered. It was true. At least, he thought it was, and he definitely couldn't remember. At this moment, the oddness of her drink order suddenly came to him. How is it that the first time someone else ordered a "Dessert Sunrise" would happen on *this* day? It felt like entirely too much of a coincidence, and William was on edge once again. Perhaps he could glean some information from her.

"Have we met before? I can't shake this feeling that I know you, or at least that we've met. Did I talk with you yesterday by any chance? The day is pretty hazy to me," William inquired.

"I don't think I've ever met you before – pretty sure I'd remember," she said as she examined his face, which was quite boyishly handsome. "And, in all honesty, my memory of yesterday is pretty hazy, too. I only remember bits of it, so it's possible we met yesterday, but I don't think so," she said thoughtfully.

William sensed a slight bit of hesitation in her answer. Did she really not remember like he didn't? Or was she trying to hide something? Was he actually the mark of an elaborate scam? He had nothing much to offer others in terms of wealth, but he was slightly flattered at the notion he would garner such attention. No, it seemed more likely that something similar happened to her.

"Do you think that's odd? We both end up here without much of an idea of yesterday and why we're here?" William asked her.

"Yes and no. I've gone on binges and benders before – I'm not always proud of them – so waking up in a beautiful place like this without a complete memory of yesterday isn't so bad. I've woken up to worse," she said.

"Did you also have a video?" she asked after some hesitation.

"Yes," his mind started racing. Why would she know this? Was she really in on it or a victim of the same circumstances? He couldn't process all the information as quickly as he needed to and didn't know what to assume. Things were definitely off, but he couldn't deduce what or why.

She saw the confusion in his mind reflected on his face. "It's kind of weird, but I have a safe word for myself. Weird things can happen, and one time years ago I came up with a word to use to tell myself to show that things were safe. I used that in my video, and I trust myself to only use it when things really are fine. Whatever is going on here, I don't think we're in danger," she said. This appeared to give William some calm, but only a little.

"Was there anything else?" William asked. He was wondering about the syringe and the phone.

"Just that my phone has an odd lock on it and I can only take pictures," she said as she pulled it out to take a selfie of them together. No mention of a syringe or anything else. Maybe someone else drugged her? William now had doubts as to whether or not he took it himself or if it was forced on him, with the evidence left behind to sow the seeds of chaos.

"All I can do is wait it out, I think. Maybe we can wait it out together? It's a pleasure to meet you, even if it is under these strange circumstances," she said.

"It's nice to meet you, too, Cindy," William said, holding his drink up to toast the occasion.

"Cheers. Do you go by William or something else?" she asked, clinking her glass with his.

"I've always gone by William. No one ever wanted to or tried to shorten it, so it's always been William," he said.

"Well, I like it. What's the point in having a name like that if everyone calls you Bill or Will or Billy or Willy or Billiam?" she asked.

"I don't think I've ever heard Billiam. Cindy is a nice, short name, though. Not much to do to that," William replied, trying to keep the small-talk going. He felt oddly nervous around her.

"Well...it's actually short for something, and only a handful people actually know what it is," she said.

"Wait a second, weren't you just demeaning shortened names?" William asked.

"Yes, for everyone else. If you knew my real name, you'd agree. Cindy is best, trust me," she said as she took a long sip from her straw.

"So do you really order this drink and call it a 'Dessert Sunrise'?" William inquired.

"I do! I've never met anyone that orders it like this before, and that name just seems really natural, right? Without the extra grenadine, it's a bit harsh and sour, but with it, it's like a dessert," Cindy.

"You took the words right out of my mouth," William said. His paranoia crept back into his consciousness, since this coincidence – the same favorite drink *and* the same name for it – was still too much. But what could he do right now? He was in paradise with a wonderful new person, and if it were a scam, he may as well enjoy the ride. Things could be worse.

"It took you long enough to come in from your swim. This is the third one I've had waiting for you to get back. I'm glad I took a chance in waiting for you, since we seem to be in the same bizarre daydream," she winced as she said this, then continued, "but I thought I'd take a shot talking with you since you seemed to be here solo, like me. So, I'm not talking with you because of your looks, but because you're the only person I saw that I could hit on this early in the day."

"Well, that's comforting. At least we're starting off with honesty," he said.

"So...come to this bar often, Jacinda?" he asked after deciding it might be fun to try and guess her real name.

"Good guess, but no. Jacinda is a beautiful name, no need to shorten it. And can't you come up with a better line than that?" she scolded him.

"Pardon me, Rumpelstiltskin," he joked.

"How are you getting further away from the truth? I'll never tell you even if you do hit on the right one. I'm Cindy, and that's it, Billy boy," she answered as she leaned back, getting comfortable for a long conversation.

They sat and talked for a while about many different things ("Where did you grow up?" "What do you do for a living?" etc.), joking and flirting the whole time. Every chance he got, William threw out more guesses for her real name (Sydney, Sandy, Cynthia, and even Crawford, since she might have been called Cindy because of Cindy Crawford). They took their time

enjoying the locale and all-inclusive drinks and bites, eventually sweating to the point the only cure was a dip in the lukewarm water. The sun was starting its downward path, and the slight breeze over the ocean made this truly feel like paradise.

They took their time kicking up sand and looking for shells as they walked along the shelf to get to the deeper water. William continued his name quest, still failing to hit the bullseye, and they continued getting to know one another. While they seemed to have very different primary interests and professions (William was an outdoorsman and a plumber and Cindy was in finance and a pop culture junky) their secondary interests seemed to match up perfectly: they both were big Trekkies and volunteered at animal shelters. "Sometimes what you think are the smaller things about yourself will connect you to others the most," his grandmother told him once after a bad breakup with a girl he thought was perfect for him. Perhaps there was truth in those words. At least, William hoped there was.

As they dove into the deeper water, Cindy playfully gave William a splash on the back of his head. Not being one to back down from a splash fight, he adeptly kicked water up and over his head, drenching Cindy's face perfectly.

She was actually quite angry at this, and chided him, "Don't you know you don't splash a lady in the face? This sunlight doesn't do my wrinkles any favors-"

He interrupted her, "-I'm sure you look even more beautiful in the moonlight."

The compliment had the desired impact and disarmed her.

"Maybe if you're lucky you'll find out," she said as she got closer to his face and caressed his cheeks with both hands. William's heart began to race, beating fast like a teenager about to receive his first real kiss when Cindy grabbed him by the hair just above both of his ears and forced his head under water. It caught him completely off guard, and William was too impressed with the swiftness and completeness of the retribution he forgot to get angry. Cindy laughed as she swam away from him, stopping a few feet away. William swam up and, without either of them saying a word, they met in the middle to share their first kiss. There was a magic in the kiss, but not what William had expected. He felt as if his mind's eye was trying to focus on an object that was incapable of being seen clearly, a vague phantasm of a once vibrant memory. Not exactly the feeling he was expecting.

They enjoyed the water for a little bit longer until realizing the sun had exacted its toll and they were parched. The alcohol didn't help with their hydration either, so they made their way quickly back to shore. In anticipation of their arrival, the bartender had two glasses of water waiting for them.

"You do know we've been told not to worry about tips, right?" Cindy said.

"You found a way to tip me yesterday," he said.

"I did?" Cindy asked him, a little confused.

"Oh, yeah..." and the bartender thought for a second at Cindy's confusion.

Remembering her earlier infatuation and flirtation with the bartender, William suddenly felt a pang of jealousy. He hadn't known her very long, but he felt oddly possessive over her.

"...remember? You gave me some advice on how I should invest some money in the short-term. I don't have many expenses while I'm here on my 3-month stints, and you told me how to maximize the interest on my money that would otherwise just be sitting in my bank account while I'm working here," he continued, speaking rather quickly. William was impressed with Cindy at this, and felt badly for the thoughts he was having only moments ago.

"I hope my advice works out," Cindy said, giving a secret shrug to William.

“That’s pretty cool,” William said. “You know, you interrupted my plans of doing nothing today, but I’m very glad, Cindy. I really didn’t know what this day was going to be like. I woke up with a god-awful headache and no memory of yesterday, so all I wanted to do was recover and wait for the sun to go down, but then you came along. Thank you. To Cindy,” he said, holding his glass up for a second toast of the day.

“To William, for taking this Princess to the ball tonight,” she said clinking their half-empty glasses together.

“Huh? What does that mean, Snow?” William was a little confused at this statement, but had enough wits about him to throw out another guess at her name, inspired by the Princess statement.

“Seriously? How would ‘Snow White’ ever become ‘Cindy’? And, did you not see the sign? Clearly you’re awful at seeing signs. They have a little ‘Under the Sea’ ball tonight. It’s something cheesy they do to give people a little something more to do at night. And you’re taking me. Well, not taking me, since I’ll meet you there at 7:00pm sharp,” she said as she finished her drink, kissed him on the cheek, and left while the only word William could get in was “Ariel?” to a response of her head shaking “no.” William saw that it was a little after 5pm already, so it wouldn’t be long before he would see her again.

William sat at the bar pondering the day he was having. While he felt fine as long as he was living in the moment, there were many parts of his memory that seemed to be blocked. The syringe, his headache, the video, and the memory loss should have been too much. It felt like he knew things that were purposefully hidden from him. And Cindy seemed to arouse that feeling in him many times, but nothing ever materialized. He should have lost his mind, but he didn’t. Somehow, he knew that things would probably be OK, and that the video he made for himself was feeling more true. It was even more unsettling that he was in such a perfect location and just happened to meet Cindy, especially since she was having a similar experience. Was she in on something or was she for real? Obviously something was off (the video had made that clear), and many signs told him something sinister was going on, but somehow the day felt right. And he felt good. Really good. Maybe that was the point of whatever he took. Or maybe not, and he suddenly felt another wave of anxiety and paranoia take over him. This constant swing of emotions was definitely not right, but also didn’t appear to be something he could control, and this wasn’t normal for him. He pulled out his phone and instinctively punched in his unlock code. It vibrated and said, “Two more incorrect guesses before complete lockout.” This gave him enough pause to realize he should just sit back, relax, and enjoy the rest of the day. He would spend most of it with Cindy and then, if he was to believe himself, whatever was happening would be over. Still, he couldn’t help but feel he needed to remain on guard just in case something bad really was in the works. He opened the camera on his phone and snapped a shot of his Dessert Sunrise, the bar, the beach, and a selfie. If he didn’t remember this tomorrow, at least there would be a record of the good times he had.

William took another quick dip in the ocean before heading back to his room to rest for a bit and shower. He opened up his suitcase (there was nothing other than clothing and toiletries) and found a perfect white cotton linen suit to wear for the evening’s ball. He shaved, showered, got dressed, and headed down a little early to look around the lobby some more and catch the sunset. There were numerous areas for newlyweds to sit privately and gaze out at the setting sun through large windows. That is, there was plenty of room for those couples with the bad fortune of a balcony on the wrong side of the hotel. He took a seat in a more common area of the lobby and gazed out at the beautiful show nature was putting on.

"I wonder if there's a drink called a 'Dessert Sunset,'" Cindy said as she came up from behind. He turned and took her all in.

"Well, what do you think?" she said as she spun in a floor-length white cotton dress that matched his suit perfectly. He caught a glimpse of her footwear, and knew her name. It wasn't a guess; he *knew* it. Like a lost memory came back. He finally had something solid to anchor his lost memories to Cindy, but he didn't know why or what it meant. Yet.

"I thought you hated your full name, yet you travel with a pair of glass slippers, Cinderella," William said, and her reaction betrayed her day-long attempt to hide the truth.

"Why are you embarrassed by that name? It's kind of neat, actually. Unless you work as a maid, have some evil step sisters, or lose your magic and beauty at midnight," he continued.

"We better head to the ball, since I'll turn into a pumpkin in five hours," she smiled shyly and took his hand.

"You made an interesting choice if you didn't want me to guess your name, unless you did," and he realized that she wanted him to guess it. If she told him, it would take away his satisfaction.

"I thought you would figure it out after you made your way to 'Snow White' earlier! I dropped that 'ball' hint for you, but you totally missed it. Snow White doesn't even go to a ball! Cinderella is all about the ball. It's about time you guessed right! These slippers are actually very comfortable, and I couldn't pass them up when I saw them. Besides, they allow me to show off the pedicure I just got at the day spa," she said wiggling her toes slightly in the cramped footwear.

"You look amazing, and if you lose one of those tonight, you can be sure I won't rest until I find you and return it," he said.

"We've certainly dressed properly for our date, wouldn't you say?" she asked, admiring their matching outfits. William tried, but couldn't completely let go of the feelings of doubt he had about this day despite how much he was enjoying it. Things seemed to be *too* perfect. It would be a bizarre scam to make him feel *this* good. In fact, the price of such a scam might even be worth it. But still, the way he *knew* her name was Cinderella meant they had met before.

"Shall we, Cinderella?" William responded, offering his arm.

"Do you know what happened to her step sisters in the original fairy tale?" she asked with a sly smile.

"No," he said honestly.

"Call me that name again and you'll find out," she promised.

"Well, this is exactly how I pictured it," William said as they entered. "Complete with a punch bowl and bubbles!"

"And it's wonderful! Sometimes you have to give in and embrace the cheese," she said.

All the feelings of happiness and joy in William collapsed entirely back into those of paranoia and doubt that he had pushed away just minutes before. He used that phrase – "embrace the cheese" – all the time, but rarely heard anyone else use it. Normally he'd write it off as an odd coincidence, but this was just one too many coincidences, and he couldn't shrug this one off. Not this time. He knew that they somehow knew each other before today, so the only thing left to find out was if Cindy was in on it. Cindy noticed William's pause after she said this, and she, too, got a worried look.

"What's wrong?" she asked nervously.

“Oh, I was just remembering how I was stood up on prom night,” he said, attempting to mask his real thoughts. William paused for a moment, overthrown by her beauty in the sparkling lights. No matter how much this felt like paradise, it wasn’t real.

“Let’s dance,” William said as he grabbed her hand.

There were about a dozen couples and it was hard for William not to have a good time, but he managed it. Their bartender from earlier in the day magically appeared to serve them again as well. While Cindy kept having drinks, William was taking it easy, as he wanted most of his wits about him when the other shoe dropped from this Cinderella. They hit the dance floor again for a bit before sitting down to take a rest. William naturally put his hand in his pocket as he sat and felt his phone. He had mostly forgotten it today, but right now he realized he needed a picture with Cindy. Whatever was happening, he needed a record of this.

“Hey, let me take a picture of this moment,” he said as he pulled out his phone and lined it up for a selfie with Cindy. He snapped the photo and it really was perfect. He felt a strong sense of comfort for a brief moment, but this had the unfortunate impact of feeding his paranoia.

“My turn,” Cindy said, pulling her phone from a hidden pocket in her dress.

“Say ‘kiss me,’” she said, planting a kiss on William’s blushing cheek and snapping a photo.

“I have to go to the restroom. Meet me at the bar and order me another one?” she continued, holding onto his hand for an extended moment before walking away.

“Wait, you-” William tried to stop her to let her know that she left her phone on the table, but it was too late.

As he grabbed her phone, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye: a little image of his face on a thumbnail. He was about to call out to her that she had left it behind, but his curiosity silenced his voice and he looked closer. It was a picture of them, only both of them looked just a little younger. He tapped it and found a folder full of pictures of the two of them together over a few years and in many different places. The most recent one was from yesterday at a pool, and it appeared to have been taken while he was making the video of himself. He looked up to see that Cindy had just entered the restroom, so he went to the bar and waited, as instructed. He slid the phone into his pocket as he ordered three drinks. One for Cindy, one for himself, and one for whatever was going to happen next.

“Can we go somewhere quieter to talk?” he whispered to Cindy as she came up and grabbed her drink.

“Of course,” she whispered back as she smiled.

They walked through the main part of the lobby and down a hallway to an alcove that provided some privacy with a pair of sunken armchairs and a perfect view of the moon shimmering over the water.

“It’s so beautiful here and I’m glad I met you. I’m not sure why I even took this trip, but maybe the reason I’m here is for you...” she trailed off as she sat down, moving her eyes from the moon to William’s face. His face was stern and vacant as he pulled her phone out of his pocket with the picture of them yesterday on the screen.

“What is this? What’s going on? What game are you playing?!” he demanded.

“Shit. I forgot my damn phone,” she paused, examining William’s face to see if there was any hope of maintaining the charade.

“I was doing so well, too. I hadn’t slipped up all day. Well, not in any way that alerted you,” she said as her demeanor turned more into one of disappointment than anything else. She

jumped up and tried to take the phone out of his hands, but he was too quick for her. He stood there, quiet in his anger, staring her down.

“What the hell is going on? You do know me, don’t you! I have this certain feeling I know you, but any details come only as vague memories? You clearly remember everything, so why did you pretend to not know me? It seems we’ve been dating for a while, so why would you mess with me like this?!” he was starting to lose his composure.

“Calm down, William! Everything will be fine, you just have to wait,” she said calmly as she put her hands down slowly and returned to her seat.

“Wait?! No! You tell me what’s going on right now!” he said even more violently.

“I can’t believe I didn’t realize this was all a sham earlier! I wanted this to be real! But why would you have ordered a drink like a desert sunrise with extra grenadine? Or why would you have said ‘embrace the cheese’? I can’t believe I was still almost fooled by you, wanting to believe today was all good. You know me well, but I don’t even remember you,” he said. His frustration about the situation and his memory was feeding his anger.

“I...I can’t tell you. We’re not supposed to know!” she said.

“Well, you *do* know! So tell me what’s going on!” William shouted back threateningly.

“We were – are – both ‘Daydream Believers’,” she said, cautiously.

“What is that supposed to mean?” He said through his teeth.

“It’s a way of knowing whether we truly belong together. We’ve been dating for 3 years, but we were both hesitant to commit, so we wanted to know if we should. It’s why I ‘knew’ those things about you! We’re in love, William. But you wanted to know if it was for real, so you convinced me to go through with a ‘daydream’. To make it happen, we both take a specially formulated treatment that makes us forget completely about each other and the whole concept of ‘Daydream Believing’ for right around 12 hours. It’s inexact and not entirely legal, but the people that make it know their stuff. Prior to taking it, we are supposed to put ourselves in a situation where we will definitely meet each other. That’s why we’re at this resort. Everyone here is coupled up except us. Didn’t you think that was weird? We were supposed to run into each other, talk, and if we hit it off, then we would know that we’re meant to be together because of who we are, and not because of our past. All doubts about whether we were meant for each other should be gone. We are supposed to put our faith in the process and believe in ourselves as we lose one another when the daydream begins, hoping we find each other again before it’s over. ‘Daydream Believers’,” she mused.

“So how come I don’t remember a thing but you seem to know everything?” he asked, attempting to poke holes in her outlandish story.

“I was supposed to take mine, too, but I couldn’t. We told that bartender last night what we were planning on doing so he agreed to keep an eye on us and hold onto the antidote in case we needed it. He was supposed to spike our drinks if things somehow went haywire. He was in on it for the curiosity of seeing such a thing happen, since he’d always heard about it but never seen it in action. I went back later and told him that I couldn’t do it and asked him to always have the antidote ready to go for you in case I wasn’t able to control the situation or if I slipped up. I was worried about myself, but that idiot was the one that almost spilled the beans earlier when he said I gave him a tip last night,” she said.

“So why would you back out?” He asked, not sure what to make of her evolving story.

“I never told you, but I did this once before and it didn’t work out. We were both devastated by it. It was a nightmare, not a daydream. I wanted this time to be different. I couldn’t stand the thought of having the same thing happen and losing you. I thought I could act as if I

had taken it and you'd never know that I didn't since I could just act like I did the first time I tried this. I just couldn't risk it not working. I couldn't risk losing you. I didn't take it *for us*...I know we're supposed to be together, and I knew that we'd still come together even if we did it, but I just couldn't take the chance. I just couldn't do it this time," she said, starting to cry, as she pulled a needle from her purse and held it out gently. It looked just like the one he found in his hand that morning with "DB" printed on it, only this one had not been used.

"Throw that away," he commanded her.

"What? Why?" she asked.

"I don't trust you," he said coldly.

"But it's just the same thing you took today. It should be wearing off of you by now! Did you take it at 8:00am like we planned? Please, William, just sit down and wait!" She pleaded, tears streaming down her cheeks and patting the chair next to her. "Or let's go to the bartender and get the antidote!" she suddenly realized.

"So you can drug me again? The ball is over, Cinderella. No more tricks," he said.

"What? No, William! Please, let's just go talk to him! He'll tell you everything I said is true! He even has a video of us talking with him last night on his phone! Let's go," she said as she stood up and made a move toward William with both hands, one still holding the syringe.

William felt threatened, and instinctually tried to steal the needle out of her hand. Her grip was solid and she wrestled it back from his grasp, causing the cap to fall off. In the ensuing scuffle, the needle worked its way into Cindy's arm, and William, in an act of rage, depressed the plunger. Cindy fell back into and then off her chair and onto the ground like a ragdoll, in a motionless crumpled mess. William paused for a moment and then knelt to see if she was alive. He felt a faint pulse, and, after a few moments, she began to moan softly and writhe on the floor. Her moaning and rolling increased until she stopped on her back and clutched her head, grimacing. William watched all of this, and remembered his own experience upon waking that morning. He was thinking about what went through his mind then, and what must be going through her head right now, when he himself was paralyzed by a flash of pain in *his* head. It was just as intense as the overwhelming pain he felt in the morning, only it subsided after a few seconds. When it was gone, his forgotten memories flooded back and he remembered everything in an instant. Everything she had said was completely true. At least, that's what his memories were now telling him. He didn't know if he could trust them, but they felt as real as anything.

"Oh, God! It's all true! Cindy! Come back to me baby! What have I done to you?" he said as he knelt down in front of her and pulled her hair off her face. As he went to stroke her head one more time, her eyes opened and her body stilled. Terror flashed in her newborn eyes and she pushed William with all of her might out of a primal drive for preservation. He was caught unprepared for such an attack and tumbled back, hitting his head on the hard tile floor. He didn't move.

Cindy screamed as she looked around for someone to help her, but there wasn't anyone, and her voice shrank in horror.

3 Percival and the Grail

“It’s the holy grail. And you know what happens to those that seek the grail, Frank,” John told his friend.

They used to be rivals. At least, John used to be Dr. Frank Victor’s adversary, but Dr. Victor never saw it that way. Once upon a time, John thought Dr. Victor was in the wrong, a true living monster. John had blamed Dr. Victor for the death of his wife, and while his hatred was misguided, it opened Dr. Victor’s eyes to how his actions impacted the world. He was always so focused on the work itself that he didn’t think too far beyond the mere technicalities of his projects. This is why Dr. Victor brought John into his closest circles: if he were doing wrong, then he wanted to make it right. And be right. John was skeptical at first and wanted to refuse the sudden offer of a position as Vice President at Dr. Victor’s company, but he was too intrigued to deny it. John has done the best he can to guide a trailblazer whose every step finds a stone no one knew existed, and in return for it he has earned Dr. Victor’s utmost confidence. Dr. Victor has followed every specific directive John has ever given him and it’s always been the right move. These directives were few and far between, and Dr. Victor was wondering if John would give him one this time.

“They never find the grail and they all die trying. It’s the ultimate irony, dying while seeking eternal life. They never find it because it doesn’t exist. You know I don’t believe in fairy tales, but this grail I’m seeking *does* exist,” Dr. Victor told him.

“It wouldn’t be you that can die here, Frank. It would be Perce. What’s the best-case scenario? You succeed and he remembers. But remembers what? Worst-case is that he dies or reverts back to how he used to be. Is it worth the risk?” John asked.

“I know you always have to play the devil’s advocate, but there really is no serious risk of harm here, only the slightest issues associated with any surgery like this. For him the risk may not be worth it. But for humanity, it might be. He’s special, you know that. He’s the only successful large-scale neural implant the world has seen. I can protect that half of him, so he should be fine. The only thing he could lose is something he can’t use anyway,” Frank replied.

“What does he think about this? Give him credit, Frank. He’s wiser than you think. I spend more time with the boy than you do, you know,” John said.

“I know, and it’s probably better that way. So, what does he want? I assume you’ve discussed it with him,” Frank asked his friend.

“Yes, but you should talk to him yourself. You haven’t seen him in two days. You don’t keep track, but he does,” John replied.

Percival was having a silent conversation with Mary when their father came in. For anyone who didn't know them, it looked just like two kids having a staring contest. But for those who knew them, and what they could do, it was obvious they were fighting.

"Come on now, break it up," Frank said as he closed the door behind him.

"But she said I forgot to feed Lazarus today when it was her turn! Today is Tuesday, and she always feeds him on Tuesdays!" Percival shouted.

"You promised to feed him this Tuesday if I gave you one of my kazoos," Mary shouted back.

"I don't have your kazoo!" Percival replied, with tears starting to well up in his eyes.

"It's not my fault you broke it," Mary said.

"It's not mine either! You never showed me how to use it. I just wanted to wash your germs off before I used it. I didn't know water would ruin it," Percival said, resigned to his kazoo-less future.

Frank couldn't help but laugh. These children were unique – modern marvels even – and they bickered over the smallest things every child does.

"Stop patronizing us!" they said in unison. It served its purpose, and Frank immediately stopped his snickering. They wirelessly communicated again through their special cochlear implants on what to do next. Rather than implanting them with normal ones, Frank had given them unique two-way implants that allowed for both the transmission of and the reception of sound with each other when they were within range. If desired, they could hear through each other's ears or talk to each other directly through them (they each said it felt like having another mouth to speak through) with no one else being the wiser.

Frank's laugh also served its purpose, and the children were no longer against each other, but were unified against their father.

"So, after two days you finally come to see us and it's only after John makes you come?" they said again in unison, this time to intentionally get under their father's skin. It was the only sure-fire method they had to annoy him.

"Please don't do that. I wish I never told you how much it bothers me," he said.

"Fine. But that is why you're here, right? Because John made you come talk about the surgery?" Mary said.

"John's right. You are growing up quickly. Well then, I guess this conversation is over," Frank said, as he got up to leave.

"What do you mean? We haven't talked about anything," Percival said, interrupting his departure.

"John's worried because he still doesn't fully understand you. Well, he understands *you*, but not your brain. We both know that this procedure will be entirely safe, and you'll come to no harm. The worst-case scenario is nothing changes for you. Well, we might have to remove the other half of your brain. That might be an improvement, come to think of it..." Frank trailed off. The children couldn't tell if he was joking or not.

"That's not the worst-case scenario. The worst thing that can happen is that it works," Percival replied, and Frank was taken aback.

"What do you mean? You've always wanted to remember what happened before the accident. You started over after it, and the only life you know is with us. But you had lived almost half your life before coming here. Did you change your mind about knowing your past? Even if it did work and you remembered, how could it be a bad thing to learn more about yourself?" his father asked.

"I never thought I'd actually be able to remember anything from my past. The idea seemed nice, but now that I'm faced with the reality of being able to remember what my life was like before you and Mary and Isaac and John and Lazarus, I don't know if I want to know. That person wasn't me...at least, I don't know if it was," Percival replied.

"I don't get it. You can have more information from the depths of your brain, and if it's not you, then just think about it as knowing more about another person. If this works, imagine the possibilities," Frank mused, his mind wandering at light speed.

"Word got out. I've seen it on the news. You know what they're calling it? The 'holy grail' and the 'fountain of youth'. Brains are the last organ we have yet to crack, and if we can keep them healthy for longer or regenerate dead tissue, then we're one step closer to immortality. I'm already half-immortal, right, father?" Percival said, waking his father from his daydream.

"In some sense, you will be forever young. Yes, the cybernetic half of your brain has shown no signs of aging, and, in fact, has grown more cohesive as time goes by. If you choose to undergo longevity treatments on the rest of your body, you could certainly become the world's oldest person with a pristine mind to match your youthful body. But you'll always be my little boy, that's for sure," Frank said to his son in an uncharacteristically sentimental way.

"You don't need to be so frank, Frank," Mary interjected, doing her best impression of John. They all got a little chuckle out of this.

"OK, we both know I'm going to go through with this. The potential to help people if this treatment works is too great to pass up. If I have to deal with new memories of another person from the distant past, or lose the last half of my broken brain, I'm fine with that. Isaac's always calling me a half-wit anyway," Percival replied.

"Is Isaac still teasing you? I'll have a talk with him," Frank sighed.

"No, don't stop it! I like it. It means Isaac still accepts me as his brother," Percival whispered.

"He always has, Perce. He just never wanted to show it. He's like that because he worries for you, Perce. I think he gets it from me, so don't blame him," Frank said, comforting his son.

"I won't, and maybe what I remember will help me, or..." Percival stated, trailing off at the end, as if he had more to say.

"See you tomorrow," Frank replied as he got up to leave.

"Only one day from now? What's the occasion?" Mary chided her father.

"I'll see Perce, not you, Mary. Every other day is enough for you," Frank said.

"Oh, you'll be seeing plenty more of me then, old man. I'm coming for you," Mary said menacingly as Frank laughed his way out of the room.

After their father left, Mary broke the silence, using her regular voice. "Are you really scared, Perce?"

"Of the surgery? No. When have I ever been afraid of that?" Perce replied confused, as it wasn't normal for Mary to not understand his emotions.

"No, of the memories, you idiot. What you said to dad – do you *not* want to remember now?" she clarified.

"Oh...I don't know. I mean, all I've heard about my previous life is that my parents weren't good people. Not just that they abandoned me for dead after the accident, but that there had been a lot of concern about my safety even before the accident. I haven't looked into any of my past yet. I've been scared of what I might learn," Percival said.

"I've looked," Mary said.

"What? You have? Why?" Percival demanded.

“You’re closer than a brother to me, Perce. I don’t have the luxury of ever learning about my biological parents – no one has any clue about the people that abandoned me. You’re the only family I’ve had and known. You had a family before, you just didn’t know them. Don’t worry, I didn’t hack anything. I just searched the public information as best as I could...and I could summarize it for you, if you want,” Mary said. It felt good to get this secret out. She collected the information over the past year. She called it her “little midnight project” that she worked on whenever she woke up and couldn’t get back to sleep. She used searching Percival’s parents as an exercise in investigation, just in case she ever had need for such a skill.

“I don’t know...” Percival trailed off.

“Look, how about I just tell you what you’ve always wondered?” she asked, this time through their special link. Percival didn’t respond, so she knew it would be ok, and continued speaking.

“Let me just say that it’s true, they weren’t saints, but it does seem that they did their best to care for you. If I had to guess, I would say they abandoned you after the accident since they thought it was your best chance at living a good life. The type they could never give you,” Mary said. Percival still sat in silence, and she left the room, closing the link. He needed to be alone for a bit.

The rain began pounding on the windows. Mary had hardly noticed, lost in thought trying to mend the old robotic dog her father had given her to fix. She knew it was his way of keeping her busy and out of his hair right now, but she couldn’t pass this up. She was just too curious and fascinated by it – it wasn’t often her father gave her a gift like this. This dog was unique, a one-of-a-kind. The operating system in it never went into full distribution and contained bits that were deemed too unpredictable for commercial purposes. Mary had known about this rare failure for a while, the one that cost the company countless millions in development that it never regained, as her father spent nine straight months trying to get it into a marketable condition. He really just wanted to give Lazarus a companion that could keep up with him and be around longer than most of his companions are. Having lived for so long (her father claimed Lazzie, as he called him, was 49, but she had her doubts), Lazarus had become quite sentimental when the regular dogs around him died. It wasn’t easy being the only cyberdog around the house.

Dr. Victor’s childhood dog, Lazarus, was the first animal that her father experimented on with longevity treatments. Dr. Victor had stumbled upon what he thought at first was a rag laying in the street as he crossed a busy intersection, but was surprised to discover that it was a dog. He was only 9-years-old at the time, so he picked him up to remove him to safety. The dog was limp and didn’t move, so he took him for dead. Not knowing what to do, he threw him into a nearby trashcan. Just as the trashcan lid shut, the dog unleashed a flurry of furious barks which turned into licks on the young Dr. Victor’s face. Having come back from the dead, Dr. Victor gave him the only fitting name he could think of: Lazarus, the man who came back to life in the biblical tale. Lazarus was a complete mutt, and his genes helped him live a long life for a dog (18 years or so, but no one knew his exact age) before his body finally began to fail. His brain seemed to be in good working order, but arthritis and other diseases were slowly nibbling away at his joints and some of his organs. Working in his private lab as a young and unknown scientist at the time, Dr. Victor began slowly adding his experimental artificial parts to replace the decaying ones in Lazarus until he became more machine than dog. Only Dr. Victor knows exactly what is inside of Lazarus (if he can remember it all) and only close family know the real secret, as the experiments on Lazarus were less than legal. John has mixed feelings on this fact, as he loves

Lazarus, but doesn't think Dr. Victor should have ever done what he did to his dog. In any event, the name Lazarus has only become more appropriate, since he has cheated death at least a dozen times. Those are stories for another day.

Had her father known what Lazarus would become, he would have chosen that name in half a heartbeat, as her father enjoyed names associated with old tales. Mary's father lived up to, and appreciated, his own name: Frank Victor. The man that would raise a dog from the dead had a name that was first-cousin to Victor Frankenstein, the fabled mad scientist that gave the world a "monster", though Dr. Victor always wondered if anyone actually read the book, since Dr. Frankenstein was the real monster. This irony was not lost on Frank Victor, but he embraced the semblance nonetheless, giving names inspired by Mary Shelley to his daughter (Mary) and Percival (after her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley). Great names, to be sure, but not very subtle. Isaac, his only biological offspring, bore the name of Abraham's chosen son. And it was Isaac that was supposed to carry on Frank Victor's legacy.

Without Lazarus and his questionable enhancements, however, Mary would not be alive today. Dr. Victor was allowed to slip through many legal loopholes if he used his own family as test subjects for his experimental treatments. Morally, it was clearly inappropriate, but the law tends not to care much about morality, and neither does the public, unless it makes their lives worse. Mary and Percival were adopted for Dr. Victor to test on, or at least that's the story many still tell. It's true, that was a part of it, as they were chosen because they were damaged, but Dr. Victor was looking to adopt anyway, and their particular situations just sealed the deal. All the children knew very little about Isaac's mother, Irene. Isaac probably knew more than he let on, but kept it to himself. She died shortly after giving birth to Isaac due to the unforeseen consequences of an extremely rare genetic condition, one so unique it still has no name, no cure, and no treatment, even with many advances in genetic medicine. Dr. Victor thought he could solve everything through the right technologies, but failed to appreciate that if the underlying system is flawed, there is little hope for victory. To this day, he still blames himself for Irene's death, since he couldn't predict what would happen nor could he save her. Sometimes, he would lock himself in his lab for days on end and obsess over some new idea for a possible cure that he had in the spur of the moment, eventually emerging more downtrodden than before. Perhaps some things are just meant to be. There is also more than a hint of irony in the unfortunate fact that he neglects his own health constantly.

Mary came into Dr. Victor's life at a most opportune time for everyone, just like Lazarus had and Percival would later. Dr. Victor began feeling the pain from the loss of Irene again when Isaac was turning 10, as he began to look more and more like a masculine version of his mother, reminding Dr. Victor of his loss every time he glanced at his son. He had always wanted to have more children, but knew he would never be ready to love again. It took a special person to love Frank Victor, and Irene was just that person. No one, even those close to Frank Victor, would ever have guessed he was as enamored with children as he was, but it was the truth. They had always talked about having a big family, and now that Isaac was also becoming more independent, he missed having a young child around. At that time, Dr. Victor had started to perfect nanobot treatments aimed at restoring and maintaining broken or faulty neural connections when he got a call from a friend at a local hospital. He had been looking for the perfect test subject, and his friend had found him one. Only this one came with quite a bit of a caveat.

Dr. Victor still remembers almost every word of the call he received from his friend, "Someone dropped her off yesterday and they included all the paperwork to give up custody. We

don't know how she got here or who the parents are – well, someone does, but it's all confidential now. She's just what you've been looking for, Frank. She's 8 months old and extremely healthy...except for something odd. We don't know what happened or what the cause is, but many of the neural connections going into and out of her brain are simply not working. Scans show that her brain is in perfect condition, but she has no sensory perceptions and only the most basic reflexive responses. It's a mystery, but the exact sort of mystery you might be able to fix. We don't know the cause, but you might have the cure. There's a catch, however. She's a ward of the state right now, and there's no way they'd consent to any of the sorts of things you want to do. However, if you adopt her, along with the loopholes that come with it..."

Everything slid into place and worked out perfectly for everyone at the time, since no one was the wiser with how discreetly everything had occurred. Frank had a growing family, Mary had a life, and a theoretical treatment had been proven to work. Except for her hearing that required cochlear implants, the nanobots that had been utilized were constantly evolving and adapting to maintain Mary's neural connections. Mary was as healthy as any 4-year-old could be when Dr. Victor got that second call from his friend at the hospital with a sad tale of a boy that was the opposite picture of health.

"I know you probably don't want to do this again—" his friend began when Dr. Victor cut him off. "I'll be right over," he simply stated.

Percival had much more extensive damage. He had been in a car crash, and his parents had been arrested following it. They had a slew of non-violent convictions and had missed numerous child welfare checks, which meant they were both in danger of losing their child and going to jail. In anticipation of this, they decided to give up their 6-year-old boy. He was barely alive and had massive head trauma, but the rest of his body remained mostly intact. Dr. Victor had been developing an experimental artificial brain based on the theory that an exact inorganic physical analogy for the biological brain would function just like an organic brain when implanted in a human body. Rather than trying for a whole brain transplant at once, he was starting with one hemisphere in the hope that the organic half of the brain could help it function and adapt. He had won some success in mice and pigs, but the human brain was more complex. It might adapt better to the new artificial half, or it might be worse. There was only one way to tell, and testing his prototype was Percival's only shot. Half of his brain was gone and the other half seemed to be on the way out. It was risky, but worth it. Despite leaving Percival with his share of scars, he pulled through magnificently. The new part of his brain took hold and adapted extremely quickly, but the old side sat dormant. It stopped degenerating and the brain tissue still appeared to be alive, but no neural activity could be detected. Only the new, artificial half of the brain was working, and Percival began life with a fresh start. Dr. Victor never asked for his birth name when he adopted him, giving him a new name to accompany his new life.

Mary quickly hit a wall with the dog she was attempting to fix. She just couldn't figure out why the OS was hanging during the boot protocols. Maybe it was a physical problem with the memory or some other problem with the hardware. That would take forever to troubleshoot, and she didn't feel like doing something so tedious right now. She had enough of it, and the incessant pattering of the rain was starting to wear on her. She decided to see what Percival was up to, which was more of a guise to see how he was doing.

"Perce, you there?" she asked over their channel. He seemed to have it off. Sometimes he'd turn it all the way off, so he would be deaf to the world, not just Mary.

She went up to Percival's room and knocked on the door. Nothing. It was unlocked, so she peered in. Percival appeared to be staring out the window at the rain. She didn't bother sneaking quietly into the room, as she assumed Percival had his hearing turned off. She dove to the floor and began to slither like a snake behind Percival. He'd do the same thing to her whenever she had her implants turned off, and it was a game they would forever play.

"I've been staring at my reflection for hours now. The rain blurs it just enough that the scars aren't visible, and I've been scouring my mind for memories from before the crash. I'm starting with my face, to see if I can remember seeing myself before the scars. But I can't," Percival said aloud, just as Mary was about to pounce on him.

"I didn't have it off. I was just ignoring you. I love the sound of the rain. It's the one thing I do remember from the day I died," he continued, as he turned his gaze away from the window and toward Mary. He always called the day of his accident the day he died, since he knew nothing of that person that lived in this body before that day. Yet, he still associated himself with the boy that was rescued from the wreck.

"It was raining. I remember a loud crash, and then the soft patter of rain. I think I remember those sounds so clearly since they were the last sounds I heard with my natural ears," Percival lamented as he touched both of his ears. They had been perfectly rebuilt with implants grown from his own skin stem cells, so that one could only tell they weren't original by the clean line where they met his head. While skin regrowth treatments were excellent and artificial cartilage was quite exceptional, re-growing many other parts of the body with stem cells was still a thing of science fiction. Regenerating many of them, yes, that could usually be done. But growing from scratch or repairing the more delicate parts of the body, especially in the nervous system, were not quite workable yet. The neural regeneration treatment his father was working on might change things, however. And even skin regrowth wasn't perfect, as the nearly imperceptible scars were still there. One had to look closely to see them, but they were there. And Percival always saw those lines on his face. Every single one of them.

"So do you want to remember more?" Mary cut straight to the point, still speaking out loud.

Percival sat silent for a few seconds and then recited this poem,

"Rain falls, a flurry of kisses on my face,
Reminders that the world is here always,
And will be, ignoring any disgrace
Never caring for who goes and who stays.
Rain falls, a cacophony in my ear
Shouting that the world, the sky is alive
Needing, caring not for courage nor fear
Unending, with no goal for which to strive.
Rain falls, fresh water creeps in through my lips-
Smell of petrichor confuses my tongue,
Into licking dirt with hints of tulips,
Memories of the earth when it was young.
Rain falls, hiding tears from the spying world.
Alone, with so much life surrounding me
Life that has forever around me swirled
But never known, loved, nor seen me for me."

Mary recognized this piece. It was one of Percival's favorites by the Unnamed Poet. Poems would randomly appear online with no attribution, but bore an encrypted signature that eventually verified they were by the same individual. Percival was convinced that they were written by a still-uncovered artificial intelligence, but most of the world believed it was just an amateur that wanted some anonymous fame. She was wondering why Percival would choose this one to recite until he got to the last lines and she saw that tears were starting to trickle down his cheeks.

"Perce..." Mary tried, but words failed her.

"You understand me better than anyone, but you still don't know what it's like to be me. I know I don't see the world like others do, but this is me. I like being an outsider, and I've finally come to accept myself that way. But what if I remember what I was like before? Remember things from before? What would that do to me? I'm scared, Mary. I don't think I can take it. I know it will work, and the organic half of my brain will start working again, but I don't know what that will mean for me. Will I die again?" Percival asked his sister. It was rare for Percival to not be sure of anything, and even rarer for him to ask Mary, his younger sister, for advice.

"I don't know. But you'll always be my Perce. You're not going to lose anything you have right now. You'll always have me," this last part she said over their channel. Percival smiled, and Mary left. She didn't know what else she could do, and Percival still needed to be alone. Only the universal language of silence could finish their conversation.

Percival woke up the next morning with a very stiff neck. He had spent the night with his head barely resting on the edge of the windowsill and he was still amazed that he fell asleep and dreamed entirely normally. He had always hoped that his organic brain would become active during his dreams, but scans assured him it did not. His dreams were manufactured in the artificial brain in the right side of his head, and his fantasy factory seemed to function normally. Rather disappointingly, studying his brain during sleep shed no light on dreams. His artificial brain mimicked a real brain so well, the only way you could tell that it wasn't a real brain was through knowing the simple fact that it was inorganic. Its structures and functions did work exactly like a real brain, just as they were supposed to, and this was the only time a neural implant this extensive had worked. The only explanation they could theorize for this success was that the inorganic brain had an organic hemisphere and most of a brainstem to rely upon to orient it after the implantation, as most attempted implants were into heads with even more extensive damage than Percival's. Smaller implants had the same awful success rate, but for different reasons: the brain didn't seem to need the new addition and simply repurposed other parts of itself to make up for the missing components. However, even those implant attempts very similar to Percival's had failed, and they still could not pinpoint the reason Percival's transplant was so successful.

Percival slowly rose from his chair by the window, rubbing his neck as he pulled his head back straight onto his body. Last night was a literal pain in the neck, but he knew he would still go through with the surgery. He always did, and his dad knew it. He'd just have to face his fears.

"Mary? You awake?" Percival asked over their channel.

"I am now," Mary replied. Percival could hear her annoyance and grogginess, despite the digital masking. She must have kept her line open the whole night, not wanting to miss Percival in case he needed her.

"Breakfast race?" Percival asked.

“Already at the table, loser,” Mary replied.

Mary wasn’t the first one to the table, however. Their father was sitting there, nursing a cup of coffee when she ran into the dining room.

“Morning, Mary,” he said, staring into his still steaming cup. He couldn’t have been there long, as he only ever had one cup of coffee in the morning.

Without missing a step, she ran to him and swung her arms around him. It was rare she saw him so much so close together these days.

“I know you won’t, but I need to hear it. Promise me you won’t hurt Perce,” Mary said, as she looked her father straight in the eyes.

He looked up from his cup and said, “Never. You know that,” he replied.

“I said I knew that, but I needed to hear it. Do you ever listen to me?” Mary asked.

“John is cooking us all up some good stuff this morning. Well, for all of us except for Perce. He can only have a few liquids,” he said. Despite the advancements in automated kitchens that spit out perfect meals with no hassle, John cooked most of his own meals, as he enjoyed the art of it. He did let the robots wash the dishes and clean up, however.

“He already told you he’s going to do it?” Mary asked before realizing that question had already been answered yesterday. All of Percival’s misgivings occurred later in the day, and her father didn’t know about them.

“Look...” her father began, before losing sight of what he was saying.

“You better enjoy your breakfast in front of Percival. Usually you’re the one having to take the light breakfast, and you know how much he loves his breakfast,” he blurted out, just before Percival entered the room.

“Biscuits and gravy, John? Yes...oh, and it’s all fresh! Made from scratch by you!” Percival said, sniffing the air. He had some artificial smell sensors in his nose to bolster the few he had remaining after the accident, and sniffing out his next meal is all he ever seemed to use them for. As he was absorbing the aroma, John entered the room with only three plates.

“Who’s not eating?” Percival asked, grabbing his knife and fork, preparing for a feast.

“You,” John said as he pushed half a glass of apple juice toward Percival.

“What?! You made biscuits and gravy knowing I couldn’t eat it? Why?!” Percival demanded.

“Consider my debt repaid,” John said to Mary.

“What did you owe her for? And why *this*!? You know how much I love your biscuits and gravy! That’s it, I’m not doing it. No surgery!” Percival stated, banging his silverware down on the table.

“Come on, Perce, don’t be so dramatic. I’m saving you a plate for tonight,” John said.

“Oh, come on! Why didn’t you just make it tonight then?” Percival whined.

“You heard me, I owed Mary one. And I knew this would repay my debt, right?” he inquired of Mary.

“Yes, this does make us even. Well-played, John, well-played,” Mary said.

“What did you owe *her* for?” Percival demanded, yet again.

“Top secret,” Mary said, as she delightfully cut into her steaming biscuits and gravy, slowly enjoying the first bite for Percival’s pleasure.

The surgery went as well as could be expected, and everything seemed to go as planned. Percival was starting to awaken from the anesthetics with Mary, Isaac, Dr. Victor, and John all by his side.

“Perce? Are you OK?” his father asked.

“I...think so,” Percival replied.

“Now, take your time. I don’t want you to be overwhelmed, but do you remember anything?” his father asked.

“I...” Percival closed his eyes pensively.

“I...don’t know. I can’t...” Percival trailed off, letting out a sigh of exhaustion.

“It’s OK, Perce. Don’t overexert yourself,” Dr. Victor said, feeling some regret for pushing him so soon.

“I just need some rest,” Percival said, as he closed his eyes and began to drift off into sleep. This sleep would not be like the dreamless one of the surgery, nor his normal slumber. The dreams he had coming were like nothing he had experienced before, but that was the only detail he could remember when he eventually awakened.

Percival finally woke up to the rising sun. He had slept the rest of the day after surgery and then through the night. His stomach was empty and therefore angry.

“Where are my biscuits and gravy?” Percival demanded, as if he had first requested them only five minutes prior.

“Right here. I knew you’d ask for these right away,” Mary said, pushing a tray holding a plate covered with foil in front of him. “You’re the same old predictable Perce,” Mary smirked.

“Guess so,” he said as he tore into the foil with his fingers, not waiting for any silverware to eat the treasure that lay buried within.

“Well, did it work? Do you remember? You know dad’s going to ask the moment he gets here,” Mary said.

“I can’t tell,” Percival said. Mary knew he was hiding something, but didn’t want to pry.

“Fine. You know he’s going to check everything,” Mary warned him.

“I know,” Percival replied as he finished licking his fingers. It was remarkable how messy he had just been while eating his long-awaited breakfast, but it was even more remarkable how clean everything now was. There wasn’t a speck on anything, as he had licked every part of the plate and his fingers clean, just as his father walked in.

“Perce! You’re awake! Feeling better?” his father asked.

“Almost back to normal, I think,” Percival responded.

“And...” Dr. Victor started.

“I...don’t remember anything new, dad. Sorry...” he trailed off.

“No need to be sorry, Perce! Let’s take a look and see if we can tell what’s going on,” he said as he prepared to do some tests on Percival.

The first tests began, which were just checking basic perceptual functions, the “old-fashioned” tests. Then he was hooked up to a litany of machines, with every element of his brain under a dozen different microscopes. Dr. Victor kept asking questions and observing what was changing and activating in his brain. He kept recalibrating the machines and asking Percival if he had remembered anything yet, and if he could try and recall something he didn’t know before. It was an odd way to say it, but he couldn’t think of a better way to try to get him to access the previously useless half of his brain. After a few minutes of examination, Dr. Victor had not yet found his answers, and looked completely perplexed.

“I don’t get it. Your brain cells are finally active. They’re not just sitting there, they’re firing like normal! We got them to get back to work. Can you feel that part of your brain?” Dr. Victor asked.

“No. I don’t think so,” Percival replied hesitantly.

“We didn’t know if your memories would be restored or not, but we thought that you’d at least be able to tell you had a whole part of your brain back in working order,” Dr. Victor said.

“All of the connections seem to check out, and the brain looks to be working just fine. Really, it looks just like a normal, healthy brain of a 12-year-old. You sure you can’t sense anything, Perce?” Dr. Victor asked again.

“No. I just feel...normal. Maybe there was nothing there, and since my artificial half can pull the load of a full brain, my old organic brain doesn’t matter anymore,” Percival conjectured.

Dr. Victor thought on this. “Maybe. We’re always in uncharted territory with you. I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see.”

When they returned home, Percival immediately turned on his channel with Mary and asked her to meet him at their “tree”. It wasn’t really a tree, but rather an old radio tower that was made to look like a pine tree. It made for easy and comfortable climbing, free of all animals, save for a few birds.

“Mary...it did work,” Percival confided.

“Why didn’t you tell dad?” Mary asked.

“I...didn’t want him to know. It all works, but I’m blocking it. Turns out I can seal off my organic brain from my artificial one. I’m scared, Mary. I don’t know if I want to know what life was like before I died,” Percival said.

“That’s amazing! You can do that? Can you teach me? Cause there are things I don’t really want to remember, mostly about you,” Mary implored.

“It’s not a joke, Mary. It feels weird. I know it’s there and I can see it if I just look in the right direction, but I don’t want to,” Percival replied.

“So why didn’t you tell dad?” Mary asked.

“I’m worried he wants me to look in there. There’s no telling if it worked or how my brain is unless I actually peek inside. But I know – don’t ask me how, I just know – that it’s all or nothing. I can’t just try to find my birth mother’s face, I need to take it all. At once. And I’m afraid of what I’ll see,” he told Mary again. This time the fear of this prospect was real because doing it was no longer hypothetical.

“Perce, dad will understand. Look, it freaking worked! You’ve got to tell him, and you know he won’t push you. Tell you what, I’ll go with you, and we’ll talk with John first. You know he’ll get it, and he’ll make sure dad doesn’t push you to go further,” Mary said.

“I guess I knew that, but I’m just still worried. This is so new to me, and I can finally learn something about my past and myself. But I just don’t know if I want to,” Percival said as he wiped away a few tears.

“It will be fine, Perce. And whenever you feel like it, you can take a look. Like maybe when you’re really bored at school, you can just open your mind and watch a book or read a movie or whatever it is that it will feel like,” Mary said.

“You mean watch a movie or read a book,” Percival corrected.

“That’s what I said,” Mary replied.

“No, you didn’t,” Percival argued back. He was actually feeling better, and, in an odd way, more whole. Nothing was new, but he now had a part of him that he could learn about when he was ready. That day would come, but it wouldn’t be for a long time. For now, he was happy, realizing that he had actually always been complete.

4 Afterword

I feel like I need to write something after having finally completed these stories. I originally had another story as the second one, but I remained unsatisfied with it, so I replaced it with another one that felt much more natural in this collection. While revisiting this work for the first round of serious edits, it dawned on me why they fit so perfectly together: “Rhonda” is about getting false memories, “Daydream Believer” is about losing memories temporarily, and “Percival and the Grail” is about the potential of regaining past memories. I subconsciously must have chosen these three to go together from all the stories bouncing around in my head because they capture the fickle role our memories play in our identities. They are so integral in how we see ourselves, yet can come and go as they please, perhaps forever, or perhaps for just a day, and almost always when you need to remember that one thing that you keep forgetting but somehow remember when it doesn’t matter.

One other thing I noticed: I spend too much time on breakfast foods in each of these stories. I must have been hungry when I was writing these. It makes sense, as I would write in the mornings or late at night as procrastination from doing my paid work, which is when I tend to be hungry. I’ll leave this short, since if I wrote any more, you probably wouldn’t read it. I know I wouldn’t.